

BEHIND THE CAMERA: TEACHER'S GUIDE

Using Behind the Camera

Behind the Camera gives background information and step-by-step descriptions of how documentary films are conceived, produced and distributed. It is useful for Language Arts or Humanities teachers in Media Studies or for any classrooms where students are creating documentary films.

The site includes seven sections, each with film excerpts and handouts for activities. There are two main ways to use the site:

1. As a film-study unit

The text and activities that follow help students to understand the nature of documentaries and some basics about how all films are made. They also introduce critical questions about how media portrayals of reality organize our perceptions and influence our judgements.

2. As a film-creation unit

This guide includes activities to guide students through the creation of their own documentaries. Teachers can choose activities that fit their particular timelines and grade level.

The Tools

Behind the Camera includes two interactive tools: the Storyboard and the Sequencer.

Storyboard

With the Storyboard tool, students use a simple drag and drop to experiment with storyboarding. Users drag images from the stills collection onto the blank frames of the storyboard, then describe the actions in each scene by entering text into the text boxes, using film terms from the glossary (section II: The ABCs of Documentary Cinema) and their own words.

Since the image bank may not provide all of the shots necessary for their storyboard, students may create blank frames and draw in their own images after they have printed the finished storyboard.

There is no Save function for the Storyboard tool. At the end of the session, students can print their storyboards to complete offline.

Sequencer

The Sequencer lets students experiment with combining pieces of film. It is not meant to be a complete film-editing tool. Some of the activities described below use it to demonstrate specific concepts.

To create a sequence, students drag thumbnail images representing film clips onto the story frame. (They can preview any of the film clips in the collection by clicking on them.) A clip may be used more than once. At any time, they can click on "play the sequence" to see the sequence they have created.

To make changes, students can rearrange clips by moving them between frames in the sequence. They may discard shots by dragging them to the trash or by dragging them off the sequence bar.

While students may not save their sequences to change later, they can send them to email addresses — their own or yours — to review and evaluate.

I What is a Documentary?

Film Study

This first section of Behind the Camera is a general introduction to the history and variety of documentary films.

The aims of this section are to:

- Place documentaries among other types of films as “the creative treatment of actuality.”
- Show that the historical development of documentaries reflected the achievements of creative individuals responding to historical events, technological advances and changing social attitudes.
- Demonstrate that different modes of documentary have different intentions.

Warming up

This section offers four examples of different time periods and types of documentaries. They are meant to introduce some contrasts and spark thinking and discussion.

You may have students watch all of the excerpts. After some general about the similarities and differences among them films, apply the quotes on the Statements about Documentary handout to each excerpt.

- The first is the famous Grierson quote. What is “creative” about each excerpt? How has the filmmaker shot the footage or used it in an interesting way? Does the editing or sound show the work of creative individuals? Each also treats “actuality,” but some may seem more realistic than others. How does each excerpt define reality, since some are carefully constructed?
- Then have students use the rest of the statements. Which statements apply to each excerpt? How? Do any of the statements not apply? Why not? Can they think of documentaries that do match the statement?

A Brief History of Documentary Film

This mini-history raises a few issues.

1. When film turned from merely documenting reality (as in the Lumière Brothers’ films) to making personal statements about reality (as in Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*), the element of point of view entered. All media have biases. Flaherty is accused of stereotyping the Inuit, for instance. Any personal selection or ordering of filmed images implies some distortion.

For discussion: “Is it possible for any film to be truly objective — and should it be?”

2. Distortion can be used for political purposes. Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* glorified the Nazis. During the Second World War, both the Allies and the Axis powers used documentaries as propaganda. The NFB was a leader in this.

For discussion: “Can propaganda be a positive use of film or any other art?”

3. Technological change affects media. Lighter cameras, high-speed film and portable sound equipment made new types of documentary possible. Artists responded by changing the style

and focus of documentaries. And cheaper video equipment meant that more people could experiment with filmmaking.

For discussion: “Do the media tools we use shape the way we understand reality?”

4. Media such as television and the Internet influence the style and the substance of documentaries. They also exert financial pressures: to sell a documentary to television, the filmmaker may play it safe and avoid controversial issues.

For discussion: “Is the Internet a new hope for creative documentaries on controversial issues?”

Modes of Documentary

The categories described in this section are not air-tight. Some documentaries have features from more than one category. This is particularly true today, when breaking categories is one of the aims of art. Nevertheless, the terms may be helpful in understanding how the form or approach of a documentary film goes hand in hand with its intention.

An interesting exercise is to have students take the subject matter of an expository film like *Newfoundland: Sentinel of the Atlantic* and re-imagine it within the different modes.

- In small groups, have students list characteristics for each of the modes described in the text.
- Then, have them outline the material from *Newfoundland: Sentinel of the Atlantic* as Observational, Reflexive, First-person and Poetic documentaries. What would they change in what and who they filmed, the techniques they would use, the soundtracks, and the way they would edit it? Have students briefly describe their documentaries in short scenarios.
- Have students present their ideas to the class. In the debriefing, examine how the different modes change the message of the film.

Film Creation

If you are planning to make documentaries in your class, this section addresses finding a topic for filming. As a follow-up or substitute to the activity for Modes of Documentary, above, you may have students suggest a few subjects close to home that might make a documentary. It might be as mundane as “The life of a student” or something related to their immediate experience. In groups, have the students suggest ideas about how they might treat the subject as an expository, observational, reflexive, first-person or poetic documentary. Once again, have them think of what or who they would film (including interviews), the techniques they would use, what kind of sound they would include, etc.

II The ABCs of Documentary Cinema

Film Study

Cultural Expression

The excerpts reflect different eras. Ask students to analyze them as examples of their times. How do they reflect cultural change from the 1940s to the '70s, including the context in which people watched the films? Can they think of contemporary documentaries that show further changes in our time?

The Language of Film

1. There are examples of many of the terms in the glossary. You may use the Sequencer Tool to review the terms and have students recognize them by creating short sequences that

demonstrate different shots or combinations. For instance, ask students to create these sequences:

- A few long shots, leading to medium shots, then to one or more close-ups.
- Angle shots: high angle, then low angle.
- Examples of camera swivels: a pan (maybe a pan right, followed by a pan left), then tilts up and down.
- Can they find examples of camera movement: dolly in and out; tracking (left and/or right) and craning up or down?

Note that the Sequencer Tool does not save the sequences on the site or on their own drives. To save work, have students email their sequences to you.

2. Use the Sequence Description handout to analyze the excerpt from *Snow Dreams* that illustrates camera movement.

- Have students record each separate shot in the sequence. For each one, use the codes from the text to describe what the camera frames (e.g. CU of carver's hands) and how it moves (pan left to snow sculpture or dolly in to carver's face). In the third column, have them describe the soundtrack, including Mus, Atmos (e.g. Atmos: rain on ice), FX (FX: thunder) and sound transitions. Some soundtrack elements continue through shots, so vertical lines can show their beginning and end points.
- Students can do the same for other excerpts available in Documentary Lens.

Film Creation

This is a good opportunity to introduce the camera. Assign particular shots to practise a variety of techniques. Students can learn about hand-held and tripod camera movements. They may even learn to use improvised dollies and tracks with shopping carts or other vehicles. Older students with cars may try trucking shots (carefully, of course). They may also experiment with interviews with cameras and sound recording, trying various microphone placements and camera angles.

Looking at the results together will give you a chance to evaluate students' ability to control focus and framing and capture sound. The debriefing offers a chance to discuss the aesthetics of film as well. There is a tendency for the beginner to use the zoom features of the camera too much, so have them compare their work with professional examples.

III Preparing to Film

Film Study

Filmmakers may be explicit about what they believe or they may allow the audience more freedom to interpret the message. Some would say that the more effective approach is for the audience to feel that they reach conclusions for themselves (even if the filmmaker has carefully urged them in that direction).

- Have students compare the excerpts from *Strike in Town* and *Back-breaking Leaf* in the Social Issues and the Economy section of Documentary Lens. Both deal with workers' issues. Are the films sympathetic to the workers? How do you know? How do the filmmakers suggest their points of view? Which approach is more effective?
- Have students look at other excerpts in the Social Issues and the Economy sections of Documentary Lens. For each, have them state what they believe the filmmaker's opinion on the subject is, with examples.

Film Creation

This section suggests a sequence of activities to begin preparation.

1. Decide What to Film

Have students brainstorm subjects for documentaries. Remember the principle, Film what you know. That does not mean that the subjects are not important. If they want to tackle serious subjects like poverty or violence, they can find examples in the community. Seemingly simple subjects (like building a canoe or a junior high school band) can also lead to interesting and serious documentaries.

Remember that a good brainstorm does not reject wild ideas. Some of the most unusual subjects make great documentaries.

2. Narrow the Topic and Find its Heart

This may be the best time to create film groups. Look for a range of skills and personalities. Some members will be natural organizers and planners; others will be visionary *auteurs*; some will be great technicians or sensitive craftspeople. At this stage, try to create working groups of people who will cooperate and complement each other.

As a group, they should decide on one or two potential subjects, then discuss what they could do with each. They should ask themselves:

- What do we know about the subject?
- What opportunities does it offer for filming?
- Why do we care about it and why should anyone else care?
- What do we feel about it?

By the end of the session, they should have narrowed down the subject. Have each group explain it to the class.

3. Research

The research phase can be very long for a documentary — longer than most class projects allow. Take advantage of the group to pool knowledge and imagination.

- Brainstorm possible locations, interview subjects (if they use them), and experts to consult.
- Discuss some good sequences.
- If they find gaps in their knowledge, make plans to find out more. Ask questions of other classmates, teachers, parents and other sources, as well as libraries and the Web.
- Take notes. One student may collate the findings.

4. Decide on an Approach

The students should be getting closer to filming. With what they have learned about the modes of documentary, they can begin to decide on their own approach. Do they want to use an observational style, recording situations in a “real-life” fashion? Or would they rather combine interviews and narration in a more expository way? Do they want to make the filming of the documentary part of the documentary itself? Or do they want to create an impressionistic depiction of the subject? They are likely to want a combination, but as they discuss the approach, they should begin to describe their documentary more precisely.

At this stage the groups should also decide who their audience will be. People their own age? Younger or older viewers? Or will they want to cater to a special interest group, who may have knowledge and opinions about the subject already? All of these considerations can affect the approach the students will take.

5. Get the Plan on Paper

As a last step in this stage, students should draft a these statement for their documentary, stating what it will be about in less than 25 words. (Students who have written essays know what this is,

and they know that theses may change as they write. The same is true of documentaries, but stating the thesis is a way to start.)

They should also define the audience.

Then they should create a shooting plan. What sequences will start the film off? How will the following sequences develop those ideas? What sequences will build interest, usually to some kind of conflict or crisis? What shots will resolve the film and hammer home the ideas or reach an emotional conclusion? Thinking in terms of sequences, each with a purpose, will help the filmmakers to envision their documentary more completely, without completely scripting the film. There should always be room for surprises and changes.

The Shooting Plan handout will be useful at this stage.

IV The Essentials

Film Study

Market forces influence the creative artists involved in documentary film.

- If one of the purposes of documentary is to stimulate social change, as John Grierson and others have claimed, how does the market-driven economy promote the status quo? Students may debate the strengths and weaknesses of a free-market system in promoting and supporting documentary filmmaking.
- How does the NFB, which is at arm's length from government control, serve the public interest? Without the Film Board, how would documentary films be made in the relatively small market economy of Canada?

This section also describes the roles of various crew members.

Film Creation

Who Pays to Make a Documentary?

1. Students who have been refining their plans can prepare a film proposal at this stage. You may have students present the proposal to the rest of the class for feedback. They can frame their proposal such questions as:

- What is the subject of the documentary?
- What is the point of view? (The brief statement they have written will be valuable here.)
- Who is the intended audience? List primary, secondary and even tertiary ones.
- What is the main plotline? Consult the Shooting Plan.
- What are the locations?
- What characters or human subjects will be filmed?
- What will the approach be?
- What are some features of the visual treatment? The sound treatment?
- Is there an editing style?
- If they were to market the documentary, how would they sell it?

2. The sample budget from the recent NFB documentary *Discordia* (in the Handouts) will give students some idea of what a documentary costs and how the money is distributed. The handout is a simplified version of a multi-page spreadsheet that details each category.

- *Discordia* included over 20 days of shooting in three cities: Montreal, Toronto and Boston. It was shot in a combination of 16 mm film, mini-DV and videotape. You might think that the production expenses would be the largest share of the budget, but production is only about half of the post-production costs. Why are post-production costs so large?

- In the full budget, we learn that Camera Labour is only 2 days of 16 mm film shooting. How might the rest of the camera work have been done? Do you think there were other ways that the filmmaker kept production costs down?
- Why are the pre-production expenses such a significant part of the overall budget?
- In this age of digital imaging and editing with computer software, is it possible to create quality documentaries on small budgets? Where do the savings occur?
- Using materials by other artists can run up a film's costs dramatically. *Tarnation* is a recent feature-length documentary that is said to have been shot and digitally edited for about US\$218. The figure is misleading, though. The filmmaker, Jonathan Caouette, uses popular music in the soundtrack, and the rights to use the music runs into hundreds of thousands of dollars. Using film clips and stock shots (a common practice in documentaries) means paying an average of \$30 per second (with a minimum purchase of 30 seconds). If students are producing their own films and want to avoid such costs, what alternatives can they use?

The Documentary Crew

The section also describes the film crew. By this time, students may already be considering the roles they might take in their documentary. Within each group, determine who will fill the essential roles. One person may take multiple roles, of course. Stress that film is a collaborative art: it is the teamwork and shared vision of the group that makes the film a success. A student project is certainly not the place for an autocratic director!

V Shooting the Documentary

Film Study

Film or Video?

Technological changes have given documentary filmmakers more and more choices in how and what they can film. They have also meant that the tools of production are in the hands of more people than ever before, particularly with software to edit movies and mix sound. In a general discussion of documentaries today, you might raise these questions:

- Does the spread of inexpensive digital video mean that documentaries can reach more people and become more effective in promoting social change?
- What might the Web mean for the distribution of documentaries?
- Do you think the successes of Michael Moore and other documentary filmmakers will mean that documentaries will be more commercially successful?
- Do you think that documentaries might appeal to younger filmmakers with alternative views that are not dealt with in commercial fictional films?
- What do you think about the future of documentaries?

On the Shoot

The examples from *Boy Meets Band* and *L'Homme vite* show different approaches to shooting the film (and different styles of editing). You can use the Sequence Description handout in section II (ABCs of Documentary Cinema) to analyze these excerpts. Consider where the camera is placed, the equipment necessary to produce the movements, and what crew members were probably present on the shoots. You will also notice how much of the work, especially the sound, was done in the post-production stage.

Film Creation

Shooting Schedule

The student filmmakers should be ready to begin shooting. You may ask them to use the Shooting Schedule form to coordinate their class time and whatever additional time they can arrange together. The form will help them meet their deadlines.

On the Shoot

You will most likely be using a digital video camera. Students have had some practise using the camera, but the director and camera operator must learn to work together to agree on the set-ups and camera movement for the shots. If you have a separate microphone (perhaps on a “fishing pole” boom), the sound recordist and/or boom operator has to be part of the discussions as well. They will have to sample various light adjustments, too.

Sometimes, the director and camera operator work out simple touch signals so that the director can tell the camera operator to zoom in during an interview or move the camera to cover something else without recording his or her voice.

Students have to get used to doing multiple takes. The advantage of video or digital video is that the students can easily choose the best cuts without the expense of film.

Most importantly, they have to learn to follow the plan — in order to film what is necessary to tell their story — but also to respond to the unexpected and capture what chance throws their way. When they are filming live action, the director and the camera operator have to keep their eyes and ears open to shots that can enhance the reality of their film.

They should also remember to film the locales for establishing shots and cutaways and to film interview subjects away from their talking heads settings to edit into the final film. The sound technician should also record ambient sound to fill gaps in the final soundtrack and other sound that might be added to the background.

The Art of Interviewing

The Interviewing Tips handout will help students prepare for and conduct interviews. They should also look for good examples of interviewing in contemporary documentaries for models of how interview techniques can be integrated into films. Remember that interviewing is not essential for all documentaries, and it can be overdone. Students should think of alternatives to over-reliance on talking heads.

VI Putting the Film Together

Film Study

1. The film editor has an extremely important role. The sequence from *Je touche à tout* shows how a skilful editor can fulfill the director’s vision with very precise and imaginative use of the filmed shots.

- Documentary Lens offers many examples for further study. The World War II-vintage documentaries (many in *War and Peace*) use sequences from military, government and newsreel sources around the world. Examine how the editor composes these bits and pieces to support the narrative.
- Later documentaries like *Motoneige* and *L’Homme vite* (available on the French side of Documentary Lens) show how editing itself can carry a story, without narration. See if other excerpts can speak for themselves without the explanatory voice.

2. Sound editing is also very important, though its effect is often subtler. The sequence from *The Dikes* (in *Science, Environment and Health* in Documentary Lens) combines sounds captured on location with others added in the studio to create an atmosphere of threat and urgency.

- Are the sounds from the excerpt synched sounds — that is, recorded on the spot directly from the action — or are they combined and created in the studio to match or imitate the action? Can you be sure, or has the sound editor made them too convincing to be identified?
- The two excerpts from *Snow Dreams* (in Documentary Lens, under Arts, Culture and Recreation) show how sound can create a mood, then enhance the dramatic development of the story. In these cases, the soundtrack uses natural and artificial sound and music to reflect the filmmaker's vision.

Film Creation

1. Digital editing with today's software has made editing easier, but critical judgment, artistic sensitivity and technical know-how remain crucial. The sequence of editing described in the text may be cumbersome for a class project, but it has essential strengths.

- Reviewing all of the film that is shot is important. A shot log can keep track of what is good about each segment, and the notes can tell the editor which shots have the most impact.
- Transcriptions are probably too time-consuming for a classroom project, but photocopying notes from the shot log and re-arranging them can be a good way to create a narrative structure for the film.
- The rough cut is essential. Whether you want to have the cut reviewed by critics from other groups (or review it yourself) is a matter of preference and time. You should encourage the groups to be self-critical at this stage. Having others view it is a good reminder that their film has to appeal to an audience.
- Refining the final cut is often a matter of taste. Digital editing programs offer many built-in transitions that can tempt budding editors. Most of them are awful. Students should build on their experience viewing professional documentaries to decide which devices actually work.

2. Sound editing is a particular art that depends upon available technology and the students' skills.

- If they are able to separate synched sound from the visuals and use it for wild sound, students will be able to create some professional effects. Look at the second excerpt from the film *Le cerf-volantiste* (on the French side of Documentary Lens) for an example of continuing the interview track over a cutaway.
- Skilful students will be able to create soundtracks combining music, sound effects and synched sound using sound-editing programs. They can also add separately recorded narration over the film.
- Mixing the sound is another element that has been made easier with digital technology, but it still takes patience, taste and a good ear. A good documentary soundtrack rarely calls attention to itself.

VII Reaching the Audience

Film Study

The business of documentary film was addressed briefly in Section V of the Teacher's Guide (Shooting the Documentary). At this stage, you may want to consider the audiences for documentary films. We often think of audiences in demographic terms, as age groups, income levels and ethnic origins. There are other ways to divide audiences as well.

- Have students do personal profiles of their interests. The list might include hobbies or areas of expertise, favourite kinds of food, music, movies, etc.
- When they have completed the survey, assemble the results on a chart. Identify common areas of interest. If possible, group the class into these different audiences, even if some of them only have two members.
- Have each group brainstorm documentary subjects that they would be interested in. They might even propose a sketchy treatment of one of the subjects that would appeal to them.
- Have them report to the class about their niche documentary. Some students might even be inspired to create their own documentary.

Film Creation

This is the chance to stage your own film festival.

- The groups may fill out the Festival Application handout.
- They should also create a one-sheet: a single page that includes a short synopsis of the film, some photos (if possible), quotes from reviews (perhaps fictional, if you want to make this playful), running time, credits and a short bio of the group (which will take the attention off the director only), and an address for interested buyers or distributors.
- Have the groups introduce their films, then show them to the class or to other classes invited to the festival. Students may even be inspired to sell their films with promotional trinkets or displays. Popcorn may be served.
- If you like, include audience awards, critics' awards, and other special awards that are common to festivals. You may devise categories to make every film a winner.