



America through the Lens: The Art of the Television Documentary

Documentary Pre-Visit Activity

Goal:

Having a working knowledge of the vocabulary associated with documentary filmmaking greatly enhances a student's overall understanding of the genre. It will also enrich the discussion the students have during the Documentary class at The Paley Center for Media. This activity will help students create concrete meaning out of the necessary vocabulary, as they apply the terms to actual examples within film.

Materials:

- Copies of one of the following films:
 - Fahrenheit 9-11
 - The Cove
 - Food, Inc.
 - Good Hair
 - Ken Burns' National Parks (one of the six episodes can be watched in isolation)
- Worksheet
- Writing Utensil
- Classroom Space

Procedure:

This activity can be done in class, or individually at home. Have the students watch one of the above documentaries. All are fairly recent, and can easily be found via services such as Netflix, or a local video store. Before screening, ask students to review the vocabulary list associated with the Documentary class that can be found on The Paley Center for Media's website. Students should keep these terms in mind as they screen their documentary, and they are encouraged to keep notes during the film to help them notice examples of these film components or techniques.

After watching the documentary, ask students to complete the attached worksheet. They are asked to note which type of documentary they watched, as well as explain occurrences of the components and techniques on the vocabulary list. If this is done at home, students should complete the worksheet individually, but share together in groups the next day with others who watched the same documentary. If watched together in the classroom, students can work in small teams to share ideas and complete the worksheet.



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Name _____ Date _____

An Introduction to Documentary Films

Which documentary did you watch? _____

What type of documentary would you classify this one as? Why? _____

Choose 3 of the following film components and explain how they are used within the documentary you watched:

- A-roll
- B-roll
- Visual Track
- Audio Track
- Text Track
- Archival Footage
- Diegetic Sound

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Whose perspective or point of view did this documentary capture? Keep in mind elements of bias, agenda, or various filming modes.



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Documentary Post-Visit Activity

Goal:

After taking the Documentary class at The Paley Center for Media, students will have a working knowledge of different documentary styles, as well as film techniques they use to convey a certain story or viewpoint. This post-class activity will now help students understand firsthand how documentaries are crafted. Students will also learn how one subject/topic can be approached in a variety of ways, and how styles and techniques can effect the project development.

Materials:

Paper | Writing Utensils | Documentary Vocabulary List | Classroom space

[For Extension Project]

Filming Equipment | School Setting

Procedure:

Divide students into groups of 4-5 students each. Each group must produce a Pre-Shoot Script for a documentary. The topic is the same for each group: A Day in the Life of Their School [the topic could be modified if the teacher desires]. A Pre-Shoot Script is the document that producers and directors put together before actually going to film their documentary. It is like a map for where they see the film going and outlines the story and techniques they will use to achieve their vision. Items that should be considered:

- How is this documentary going to approach and frame the topic?
- What or whose story are you going to tell?
- What documentary techniques and film elements will be used?
- What do you want this documentary to accomplish? Why is it being made?
- What research should be done ahead of time to be well prepared for the shooting? How will this research be used within the documentary?

When students are done compiling their Pre-Shoot Script, come back together and have each group present their ideas to the class. Discuss how the similarities and differences between each group's ideas. Which film style direction did each one take? How many different ways were there to approach and capture the same subject? Students should also ask questions of each group, challenging them to flesh out their ideas further. Be sure to ask each group what difficulties or issues they see potentially arising in their filming process, in regards to how they have laid out their plans. Make sure that students use the appropriate Documentary Film vocabulary in their discussion, including film styles, components, and other technical ideas.

Evaluation:

At the conclusion of this activity, students should have a better understanding of how documentaries are crafted and how film elements and styles can influence the story being told. They will also see how many different ways the same topic can be approached. Students should now feel more confident and comfortable using the documentary vocabulary, as well.