



Lesson Plan: Introducing Documentaries to Your Students

OBJECTIVES

This lesson helps students understand that documentaries are a type of storytelling that explores factual stories and issues using film or video. By the end of the lesson students should know the difference between fact, fiction, and opinion and be prepared to watch documentaries in class.

GRADE LEVEL

6–9 with adaptations for 10–12

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED

Two 50-minute class periods

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Copies of Viewing Guide (1 per student)
- Vocabulary Handout (1 per student)
- Internet access with computers available to small groups of students

Note: If computer and internet access are not possible, focus on Steps 1 and 4. As a whole group exercise, use the prompts in Steps 2 and 3 and analyze downloaded documentary and filmmaker clips.

SUBJECTS/TOPICS

By choosing film clips and filmmakers related to particular topics, you can customize this lesson to focus on core curriculum topics. In addition, the lesson offers opportunities to cover: media and digital literacy, ethics, observation, listening and speaking skills.

ACTIVITY

STEP 1: PIQUING INTEREST

- a. On the board, write in large letters:
 - **Represent**
 - **Re-present**
- b. Ask students what meanings they find in these words. Encourage them to explore all possible meanings and ask them to list things they encounter in and out of school that “represent” or “re-present” other things.
- c. Wrap up the discussion by telling students that these words are related to a particular form of storytelling called “documentary” and that by the end of the lesson, rather than you telling the students what a documentary is, they will be asked **to tell you what a documentary is and how it is different from other types of films and videos.**

IF TIME ALLOWS, or with older students, follow this discussion with discussion of a second word pair:

- Fact
- Art

Ask students to think about what each term means separately and what they might mean when put together.

STEP 2: VIEWING CLIPS

- a. Ask students what they already know about documentaries. After soliciting a few answers, divide students into teams of three and tell them that they are going to begin looking more closely at what distinguishes documentaries from other forms of media.
- b. Give each student a copy of the “Introducing Documentaries: Viewing Guide” handout. Tell them they are going to be viewing a clip from a documentary film and that each person on the team should look for the answers to one of the questions, except for question 4, which can be answered by anyone (or everyone) on the team. Also let students know that they should be prepared to report their results.

For older or more advanced students, you might want to add more challenging questions to the handout, e.g., for interview footage: “When you see a person speaking in a documentary, you’re seeing them answer a question asked by the filmmaker off-screen. What questions do you think the filmmaker was asking in this clip?”

- c. Review the vocabulary on the handout—not as a list of terms for students to memorize, but as language that teams should use to discuss what they’ve seen. Briefly review the questions on the handouts so that everyone understands what they are looking for. It is especially important that students understand the difference between
 - Re-enactment and live action (verité) footage
 - Stock or historical footage and images shot by the filmmaker

Also, let students know that when answering “who” questions, it is more important for them to write down a person’s role than their name (e.g., a teen mother, an environmental scientist, a government official, etc.). The idea is to familiarize students with concepts related to documentaries and to introduce them to a different set of observation tools that they might not typically use when they watch films. One hundred percent accuracy in detail (e.g., a person’s full name) is not necessary at this stage.

- d. Depending on the age and ability of your students and your curriculum needs, you can allow students to select a clip from the POV website under “Classroom Clips”: (www.pbs.org/pov/video/search.php?search_type=type&cat=classroom_clips), or you can select several clips related to your curriculum ahead of time and assign one to each group. It is important for the activity that each group is looking at a different clip. Note that allowing students to choose their own clips may increase their interest in the task, but it will also take more time. Also be aware that in order to complete the handout, teams may need to watch their clips more than once.
- e. While students are viewing clips, create a master display on which you can record yes/no answers from each team. You might try affixing dots or check marks in the appropriate boxes, or entering results into an electronic audience response system. The important thing is that everyone has a chance to see their results in combination with everyone else’s.

- f. Solicit and display results for the yes/no parts of the handout. Remind students that they were all looking at different clips and ask if they can make any generalizations about the techniques that are commonly used in documentaries. For example, in many of the clips, interviews will be prominent. You might note how this is different than Hollywood films by asking if anyone can recollect a movie they have recently seen that relied on interviews to tell the story.

Continue the discussion by asking students whether they think what they watched was fact, fiction, or something else (e.g., opinion or a fictionalized account of an actual event). Be sure they explain their reasoning and the evidence on which they based their conclusion. HINT: If everyone was viewing POV clips, no one was viewing fiction.

Wrap up the discussion by asking volunteers to share what they wrote in answer to question 4. Encourage them to think about what their answers might tell them about documentaries.

IF TIME ALLOWS, or with older students, continue the discussion by exploring what types of people appeared (e.g., experts), and who was telling the story. You might also ask if anyone is interested in watching the entire film from which the clip is taken, make the film available, and offer individual students an opportunity to write a review or summary of the film and report back to the class (or post it on the class website).

STEP 3: LISTENING TO FILMMAKERS

- a. Remind students of the major task: At the end of the lesson they need to be able to tell you what a documentary is and how it is different from other types of films (or videos). In the previous step they looked at what is in documentary films; now they are going to have a chance to listen to the people who make documentary films.
- b. As in the previous step, depending on the age and ability of your students and your curriculum needs, you can allow students to select a clip from those available on the POV website under “Filmmakers,” then “Filmmaker Interviews” (www.pbs.org/pov/filmmakers/filmmaker-interviews.php), or you can select clips related to your curriculum ahead of time and assign them to each group. Students may be interested in selecting an interview with the filmmaker(s) who made the clip that they previously viewed. In many cases that will be possible, but it is not required for the purpose of this activity.
- c. Let students know that they should be listening for two very specific things as they watch the interviews:
 - What things are important to the filmmaker(s)?
 - Listening to the filmmakers, what did you learn about what a documentary is?

Students can work in groups and may pause the interview as they discuss these questions. They do not need to write down their answers, but they may want to take notes so they are prepared to share their answers with the class.

- d. After viewing, ask students to answer each question either in class discussion or by recording answers on a class wiki, whiteboard or chalkboard (or any other means that you have available). You might make special note of whether students encounter filmmakers:

- who are passionate about the issues they cover,
- who express opinions as well as present facts about their topic,
- who make films to try to persuade people to take a particular position on an issue or to inspire people to a particular action,
- who want to tell a story about a unique person or event, and/or
- who want to use film as an art form to explore a particular subject, issue, person, or event.

All of the above would be common for documentary films.

- e. Wrap up by asking students to name some important things they learned about documentary, not only from their own investigation, but also by listening to answers from the other groups.

Note: If you are splitting this lesson up over more than one class period, this is where you would end the first day. Let students know you will come back to their exploration of documentaries in the next class and that in the meantime they may want to take their handouts home and look for how the media they use outside of class compares with what they discovered about documentaries.

STEP 4: MAKING A DOCUMENTARY ROLE PLAY

- a. In this step students take on the role of being a filmmaker. Working in groups of 4 to 6, students should consider the following scenario:

In preparation for a community-wide open house, students and teachers at Anyburg Middle School decided that it would help people understand the school experience if each class recorded a video of a typical day. The school had a limited amount of video, sound, and lighting equipment, so staff worked out a schedule for each class to have the cameras for two days.

By chance, Ms. Perez's science class ended up with the cameras on days when students were doing test prep. The students didn't think that footage of them mostly reading, taking notes, and occasionally asking questions was representative of their normal, vibrant class with hands-on labs and real-world research problems. But that left them with a dilemma. Should they shoot what was actually happening in their class that day, or should they re-enact what would happen on a more typical day? To make things even more complicated, on the second day of their video shoot, someone accidentally knocked over a tray with test tubes and beakers. This had never happened in class before. Students disagreed about whether to leave in or edit out the footage of the accident and cleanup.

Ask students to discuss the following in their groups: In your view, in these circumstances, what production choices would a documentary filmmaker make and why? How about a Hollywood filmmaker? How about a reporter from a local television station? What would be the best representation of the class and why?

- b. After giving students several minutes to discuss the questions, call the groups together to share responses. Help students make links between what they discussed and what they learned about documentaries and documentary filmmakers from steps 2 and 3.

Note: There is no “right” answer. Even experienced documentary producers disagree about how best to convey “truth” and whether things like re-enactment are appropriate. The idea here is to get your students talking about what values are in play for each type of media-maker. The Hollywood filmmaker might be more concerned with drama, the news reporter more concerned with accuracy and what footage they can get during the ten minutes they are in the school, and the documentary maker might step back and ask what is most important for the community to understand about this class.

IF TIME ALLOWS, or with older students, ask students to brainstorm additional production options. Are there things this class could have done to convey their message besides re-enactment or shooting students reading? If your students were going to document their own class, what kinds of things would they want to shoot and why? What would count as a good *representation* of their class experience? Would it be the same for every student?

STEP 5: WHAT’S A DOCUMENTARY?

- a. Return to the word pair(s) that kicked off the lesson and ask students again how the words relate to documentaries.
 - Then, going around the room, ask each student to contribute just one idea, develop a co-created explanation of what a documentary is and what distinguishes the form from other types of films. Jot down answers as you go so the class has a visual record of their response. Keep going until you run out of answers.
 - Ask everyone to look at what they have created and see if anyone has any disagreements or clarifications. The answer should include something about documentaries being both factual and artistic. It may also include something about opinions, issues, and persuasion.

ASSESSMENT

The best assessment would be to have students make their own short documentaries and to critique one another’s work based on what they have learned.

If that is not possible, you might show clips from several different types of films or videos (e.g., a clip from a Hollywood film depicting an historical event, a YouTube clip of a stunt in someone’s backyard, a clip from a POV documentary related to class curriculum, and a cartoon of a historical event or person). Ask students to identify whether the clip is a documentary or not and have them explain their reasoning.

EXTENSIONS

- Show a documentary related to a topic you are teaching in class. In addition to discussing the content of the film relevant to that topic, use POV’s Media Literacy Questions to analyze the film.
(www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php)

- Have a discussion about filmmaking ethics: When filmmakers tell someone else’s story rather than their own, what responsibilities do they have to their films’ subjects? What are the ethics that should govern putting someone else on film? Should the subjects of the film be shown the footage? Should the subjects have a right to decide what is or is not included in the film?
- Engage students in a hands-on activity that will deepen their understanding of how a filmmaker’s purpose influences content.
 - a. Divide the class into three groups and tell them that they will be writing plans for a documentary about their school cafeteria. The plans will include:
 - A list of the things they need footage of
 - Potential interviewees, including roles of those interviewees (Are they the film’s subjects? Experts? Opposition?)
 - Main questions they would ask or address
 - b. Allow them 10–20 minutes to plan their film and discreetly give each group a specific angle to take when thinking about their plans:

Group 1 – How does the student body feel about the school cafeteria? What do the students like? What do they think can be improved?

Group 2 – What kind of food is being served? What is the nutritional value? How does the quality of food compare to that of neighboring schools’ cafeterias?

Group 3 - Profile the head chef in the cafeteria.
 - c. Have each group present the elements of their plan without revealing their assigned focus. After all three groups have presented, ask for observations about the similarities and differences between plans. Ask them to guess what accounted for the differences.
 - Then, reveal the three different angles and discuss how three films, all looking at the cafeteria, could turn out to be so different. Be sure that by the end of the discussion students understand the link between content and perspective.
 - Advanced students might also discuss how content might have differed if they had the same assignment, but wanted to convey different points of view (e.g., they were all looking at the nutritional quality of the food, but one group wanted to highlight improvements in recent years, another group hoped to raise additional funding by highlighting improvements that still needed to be made, and the third group opposed the changes and wanted a return to foods that a greater number of kids liked, such as pizza, burgers, chicken fingers, and fries.
- Discuss why a television series and website that showcases independent documentary films would choose the name “POV.”

STANDARDS

These standards are drawn from “Content Knowledge,” a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning) available at <http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>.

Language Arts

Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

Standard 10: Understands the characteristics and components of the media

Visual Arts

Standard 1: Understands and applies media, techniques, and processes related to the visual arts

Standard 4: Understands the visual arts in relation to history and culture

Life Skills

Standard 1: Contributes to the overall effort of a group

BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR TEACHERS

The term “documentary” was originally used in a 1926 review of Robert Flaherty’s **Moana**, a film about residents of Samoa. Prior to that, terms like “actualities” had been used for informational films. Because editing capabilities were limited, the films tended to be short and without any elements of narrative storytelling or creative cinematography (e.g., straightforward footage of a train leaving a station).

Flaherty is credited with changing the documentary landscape in 1922 with the film **Nanook of the North**, an ethnographic look at Arctic-dwelling Inuit Eskimos. The film instigated some of the most important debates about the practice of documentary filmmaking. Flaherty was accused of staging some of his scenes, and in response, said, “One often has to distort a thing to catch its true spirit.”

Another debate was raised in the 1930s with Leni Riefestahl’s **Triumph of the Will** (1934), a record of a Nazi Party Congress, and **Olympia** (1938), which documented the 1936 Berlin Olympics. Both were considered cinematographic masterpieces, but many also believed that they were more propaganda than documentary.

As the use of film spread, the types of documentaries diversified. Since the 1930s, documentaries have included:

- Educational films (made primarily for classroom use)
- Newsreel depictions of events
- Nature films
- Biographies
- Autobiographies
- Films designed to raise awareness about social issues and inspire people to action

One of the distinguishing characteristics of many documentary films is that they are not only informational but also artistic. Film Historian Tim Dirks describes them as “factual works of art.”

For the purposes of awarding the Oscars, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences defines a documentary film as a:

nonfiction motion picture dealing creatively with cultural, artistic, historical, social, scientific, economic, or other subjects. It may be photographed in actual occurrence, or may employ partial reenactment, stock footage, stills, animation, stop-motion, or other techniques, as long as the emphasis is on fact and not on fiction.

The films featured on POV are also “independent” documentaries. The topics the films explore are selected not by big studios but rather by the people making the films, many of whom have a very direct, personal connection to the stories they are telling.

Sources

AMC Filmsite. <http://www.filmsite.org/genres2.html>

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

<http://www.oscars.org/awards/academyawards/rules/rule12.html>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Faith Rogow, PhD, started Insighters Educational Consulting in 1996 to help people learn from media and one another. A frequent speaker and master trainer, she has served as a consultant and educational outreach designer for a dozen children’s television series and has authored discussion guides for more than 120 independent films. She was also founding president of the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) and served as the Director of Education & Outreach for WSKG Public Television and Radio.