Media Lab

ADVANCED DOCUMENTARY

LEARNING RESOURCE

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CONTENTS: ADVANCED DOCUMENTARY

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AFTRS MEDIA LAB provides accessible media arts resources to Australian primary and secondary teachers and students. MEDIA LAB will help build core creativity and storytelling skills that will be required for the jobs of the future. The Australian Film TV Radio school (AFTRS) is the nation's leading screen and broadcast school that delivers future-focused, industry-relevant education, research and training.

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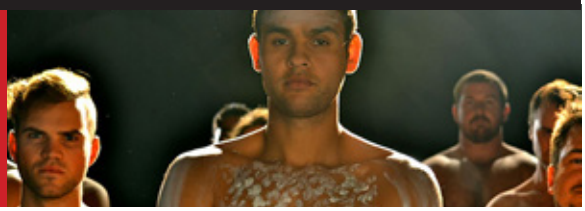
INTRODUCTION



The world of documentary is a constantly changing one. Technological advances and new technologies are rapidly becoming more available. As the size and price of the equipment becomes smaller and costs less, we can expect to see more documentaries using technologies such as virtual reality and augmented reality. Documentary filmmaking has always been defined by its relationship to reality and that is a major part of this unit. These new technologies have the ability to change our perceptions of reality and documentary filmmakers will reflect this in their work.

As far as this unit is concerned, we will be using the technologies available in schools in the making of your documentary. If you have the technology and the know-how to push the envelope with new technologies, go for it. But no matter what technologies you use, the history, the theory, the ethical issues, moral dilemmas and the processes of documentary storytelling remain the same.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

When making a film there are several things a filmmaker must consider in terms of the ethics of storytelling. Ethics is "doing the right thing" and means that you must take into consideration other people's perspectives, how you handle the subject matter and the impact the documentary may have on the people in your film.

Ask yourself the following questions and discuss with your classmates:

What is your connection to the subject, whether it's an individual or community? Do you belong to this community? If not, are you the right person to tell this story? What is your intention when telling this story? Is it done with the permission of the person and/or community?

Remember if you are sharing a story about a particular community, it is very important to consult with diverse voices within the community, as a way of seeking permission from them to tell the story. Make sure one person's perspective is not skewing the representation of an entire community. The characters in documentaries will live their lives long after you've finished working with them, so it is important to consider how you represent them.

INDIGENOUS CHARACTERS AND THEMES

Australian storytellers who want to make a film with Indigenous characters, direct a documentary focusing on the Indigenous community, or write a script with Indigenous material need to be familiar with specific filmmaking protocols and practices. To learn more, review Screen Australia's Pathways and Protocols Guide:

https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/about-us/doing-business-with-us/indigenous-content/indigenous-protocols

SECTION 1

WHAT IS DOCUMENTARY?

What is a documentary? At its simplest, it is an attempt to capture reality. What that reality is and how to capture it are questions we will be looking at later.

A documentary can take many forms. It can be made using audio technology such as radio or podcasts; photographically using a still image camera; or using moving image technology such as a video or film camera. For this unit, we will be focusing on the moving image.

People have been trying to capture reality for thousands of years. From the earliest cave paintings, artists have wanted to capture reality and people have wanted to view that work. Realistic painting gave people a glimpse of a reality that they may never experience. It became a way to inform and influence an audience, amongst other things. Artists became concerned with capturing what they saw before them as realistically as possible. The invention of the camera both changed art and led to the creation of a new art form: the moving image in general and documentary in particular. The camera made a faithful reproduction of what happened in front of it, so artists no longer felt they needed to try and depict reality. It allowed artists to feel free to use their art to present ideas, impressions and expressions. The still camera evolved into the movie camera and both fiction and documentary film were born.

But a documentary is more than just recording what is front of the camera.

Documentary is about the capturing of reality and then arranging the footage to tell a story. Storytelling is the essence of documentary and this is where documentary differs from television news and current affairs. Television news and current affairs tend to present their footage as a part of a larger picture. Documentary is self-contained and usually tells a specific story. Like any story, documentary follows narrative conventions. Narrative conventions are the signposts that we, as viewers follow to read and make sense of the story. These include things like story structure:

We expect a story to have a **beginning** that sets the scene and raises questions in the viewer's mind... → A **middle** where the questions are investigated and... → An **end** where, hopefully the questions are answered and the viewer is satisfied

A purpose is another thing that makes a documentary different to other forms of film and television. The purpose of a documentary is usually to inform an audience about a particular event, cause or issue and to present that from a particular point of view. A documentary also usually has a goal beyond entertaining – although entertainment is important to keep the audience engaged and watching. Documentaries are often made to educate, to make an audience question events or ideas and to become active with a cause or issue.

When we talk about a documentary capturing reality, the important question is: what and whose reality we are talking about? This has been a fundamental question in documentary filmmaking and it is one that you, as a documentary filmmaker, will need to answer. Film theoreticians have argued that even just filming something changes the "reality" – at its most obvious, people will behave differently when they know they are being filmed. This act of filming changing the reality is known as the pro-filmic event.

A documentary is also a process of selection, omission and construction. This means that someone has selected what they will be filming, left out bits they don't want and then constructed the footage into a story/reality. That story is seen from the point of view of the filmmaker and is presented to us in the way they wanted. This is why some say the documentary is a fictional reality.

"Every cut is a lie. It's never that way – those two shots were never next to each other in time that way. But you're telling a lie in order to tell the truth."

Wolf Koenig
Canadian documentary filmmaker

WORKSHEET

1 What is a documentary?

2 Name two documentaries you have seen:

3 What did you like or dislike about them?

4 What was it about the documentaries that made you feel this way?

5 Do you think a documentary can capture reality? Why do you think this?

6 Watch the documentary:

The Outdoor Australia
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g5k1wtbj43Y

a) Whose point of view is being shown here?

b) Do you think the filmmaker had a particular audience in mind when they made this?

c) Why do you think the filmmaker chose these shots, music and commentary?

d) What do you think the filmmaker may have left out of this clip?

e) Is this the Australia that you live in or recognise?

f) What do you think is the purpose of this short film? Is it to document what the filmmaker thinks is Australia or is it to promote Australia? Can a documentary do both of these things?

4 Write out a voiceover for this clip which changes the way we would view it. Read it out to the class.

SECTION 2

HISTORY OF DOCUMENTARY

Some of the earliest films made were called “actuality” films – they were called that as they were seen to be filming a snippet of “actual life” – and these came to be seen as the first documentaries. The very fact that moving pictures existed was fascinating for a population that had only ever seen still images.

https://archive.org/details/ThomasEdisonCo.FredOttSneeze

The audience did not ask for much with the earliest films, the fact they moved was enough!

These actuality films consisted of a cameraman – they were all men then – positioning a camera somewhere he thought was interesting, cranking the camera – all cameras were hand powered – and capturing a scene where life apparently went on around them. These films were very short, usually around a minute or so.

Although it was the American inventor Thomas Edison who developed moving picture technology in the late 1800s, France was making the most of the technology at this point in time. The Pathé brothers were making actuality films such as *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*. This is a good example of one of their early films. While to us it seems very unremarkable, to audiences at the time it was fascinating to see things happen that they were not present to see.

Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat 1895
https://vimeo.com/279306902/dbdb5b725c

Australia was one of the early adaptors of the new moving image technology, and in 1896 the Melbourne Cup was filmed. This was a significant advance; the film was approximately six minutes long and was more than just cranking the camera at an event. It developed classical storytelling conventions and the film had a structure: there was a beginning (people arriving at the racecourse), a middle (the race) and an end.

Shortly after the Melbourne Cup film premiered, the world of film split in two. One stream became narrative fiction – that is films that were not reflections of a reality but were "made-up". Once again, it was Australia that led the way. Some of the earliest fiction films were shot in Melbourne. In 1900 the Salvation Army used short snippets of film to tell bible stories in *Soldiers of the Cross*, and in 1906 the world's first narrative feature film *The Story of the Kelly Gang* was made and screened in Melbourne.

The other stream grew out of the actuality films and became documentary. Audiences soon became tired of just watching slices of life and wanted something more – although they were, and we still are, attracted to watching "real life". Filmmakers tried to document or record life and life stories, and documentaries were born. Documentaries began using narrative/storytelling conventions and techniques, but instead of applying these to fictional stories they applied them to real life experiences.

But the central question remained: how does a filmmaker show/portray reality?

This question seemed to split documentary filmmakers into two main groups: those who thought it was possible to portray an objective reality and those who thought that the filmmakers, their process and presence changed the reality. Among the second group of filmmakers was the Russian documentary maker Dziga Vertov. Vertov made a film called *Man with a Movie Camera* in 1929, and it changed the way many people saw documentary. While the subject of the film is a day in the life of Russia, it was also about the making and construction of the film that the audience is seeing. We often see the cameraman shooting the scene, the subject's reaction to being filmed and the camera's view, as well as the editor looking at that piece of film and editing it. Then Vertov cuts back to the action. Vertov's point was to draw the audience's attention to the construction of the film and for them to be reminded they are watching a construction of reality, not reality itself.

Trailer: Man with a Movie Camera
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BtTlgxtoqhg

This trailer for the restored version of Man with a Movie Camera gives us a taste of Vertov's techniques to remind the audience they are not watching real life but an interpretation of it.

On the other hand, other filmmakers were making documentaries that hid the production process. In Robert Flaherty's film about Inuit culture *Nanook of the North* we never see the film crew. Instead, the camera (and audience) are positioned as invisible viewers who watch the action played out in front of them as if they were present and watching. This "invisible" style of documentary hides the fact that the film has followed a process of selection, omission and construction.

So, by placing the viewer as an invisible observer it makes it seem possible for the documentary to capture an objective reality. This has become the dominant style of documentary and one we particularly see on television. The other style of documentary can be called the personal style – this is where the filmmaker is present and the filmmaking process has attention drawn to it. The audience is reminded that they are seeing one person's interpretation of the events or the reality.

WORKSHEET

1 Why do you think audiences were engaged by actuality films?

2 What do you think the differences are between an actuality film and a documentary?

3 Why do you think some filmmakers think it is important for audiences to see the elements and construction of a documentary?

4 Watch the 1896 film of the Melbourne Cup:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TOUxWVC90Fk

a) Does the camera move at all? What effect do you think this has?

b) How do you think the film has been structured?

c) Watch from 4 mins 50 secs. The man in the long grey coat is the producer, Walter Barnett.
Why do you think he runs into the crowd waving his hat? Do you think it is the right thing to do?

SECTION 3

DOCUMENTARY GENRES AND STYLES

Most moving image films can be put into categories, and these categories play a large role in shaping the film. These categories are called genres.

Genre
is French for kind or type. In film and literature, it usually relates to the content – that is, what the film or book is about. So, documentary itself is a genre just like action or romantic comedy. Technically documentary is divided into sub-genres but most people just talk about documentary genres.

Style
relates to how the content is presented. For example, a voice-over or a hand-held camera can be a stylistic device.

Audience expectations also shape a documentary. We expect certain things from a documentary just as we do from a fictional film. A documentary will have narrative conventions and technical codes that will structure the story and engage the audience and meet their expectations.

NARRATIVE CONVENTIONS IN DOCUMENTARY

Story structure

As an audience, we expect a story (even if it's a real story being told we have the same expectations) to have a beginning, a middle and an end. In a documentary, the beginning is usually when the main question is being asked. A documentary on climate change, for example, may pose the question: is climate change having an impact on certain animals? The middle of this documentary might look at a specific animal, such as a polar bear, and the end will answer the question raised at the beginning – and possibly provide a solution. The audience's expectations will have been met and they will feel satisfied. A documentary does not just stop at some random point, it concludes.

Character

In a documentary, it is usually a character and their development that moves the story forward. Questions will revolve around this character. Are they innocent of the crime they have been accused of? What impact did an event have on them? How did they cope and what will they do? These questions keep the audience engaged and move the story along. A character does not have to be human, either; in a nature documentary, an animal can take on the role of a character.

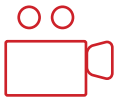
Point of View

A documentary will provide a particular point of view. It may be that of the filmmaker or one of the characters in the documentary.

Setting

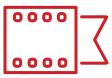
Documentaries tend to be shot on location rather than in a studio.

TECHNICAL CODES IN DOCUMENTARY



Camera

The camera is usually not seen by the viewer in a typical documentary, and this is particularly the case in "invisible" documentary. Camera shots tend be a long shot to set the scene and mid- shot to close-ups for interviews. Camera movement is usually limited although the camera may be hand-held and move with the camera operator.



Editing

The film is usually edited in chronological order – that is it follows real time, it starts at day one and continues in time order, although there may be flashbacks. Editing can be used to emphasise particular elements to focus the audience's attention or even to manipulate the audience's emotions. We will look at the ethics of editing in the next section.

Lighting

Usually a documentary will use the natural lighting that is at the scene – this is called "available light". If there is artificial light it will try to look as natural as possible. Dramatic lighting is usually not used unless it is to hide someone's identity.

Sound

Generally, like lighting, sound tries to be as natural as possible – to be what the audience would hear if they were there. Dramatic music can be used to manipulate an audience and so can a voice-over – both of these can direct an audience. The ethics of sound will be looked at in the next section.

STYLISTIC FEATURES IN DOCUMENTARY GENRES

While most documentaries share the same narrative structures and technical codes, there are particular elements/stylistic devices that can be seen in documentary genres. Some of these are:

Nature documentaries

The style is generally invisible, there is usually an authoritative voice-over – often called the "voice of god" which gives little room for other readings. The camera and sound equipment are invisible to the viewer. The viewer is positioned as though they are a fly on the wall. The animals often act as characters, we usually follow them and human characteristics are given to their actions. David Attenborough films are typical of this genre.

Historical documentaries

Like the nature documentaries, these usually use an authoritative voice-over giving facts and interpretations. There are often re-enactments with actors playing historical characters. We may also see archival footage – this is film that was shot at the time by someone else. Typical of these are films about ancient civilisations or past wars. Ken Burns is considered a particularly skilled director of the historical documentary genre.

Cinema verite

This means "truthful cinema" in French. There is no voice-over and the camera and audience are positioned as though they were invisible observers. Cinema verite tries to show real people reacting to real situations. D.A. Pennebaker is a famous director of this genre.

WORKSHEET

1 What does an audience expect when they watch a documentary? How might this shape a documentary?

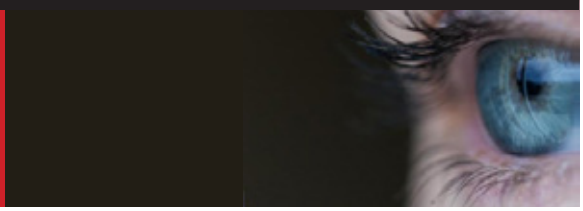
2 List five documentary genres you know of – try not to use the ones mentioned above. Write at least one stylistic feature you associate with them.

3 Thinking about cinema verite, do you think the camera and/or director can really act as a neutral observer. Why do you think this?

4 In pairs write a two-minute voiceover for a typical nature documentary for a new species found in your school, this could be an animal, human or a sub-culture or particular group in the school.

SECTION 4

DOCUMENTARY AND TRUTH



As we have seen, documentary filmmakers are concerned with capturing reality and telling the truth. This is the basis for documentary films; otherwise they would not be any different to fictional films. So, as an audience, we need to be able to trust what the filmmaker is telling us and that they are telling the truth as they see it. You, as a documentary filmmaker, will need to be able to have this trust both from your audience and from the people in your film. The audience is trusting you to be truthful, and the subjects of your documentary are trusting you to honestly tell their story.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-XIKHTRfn4

Documentary filmmaker Errol Morris calls it "the ugly truth in documentary."

We have expectations of professional documentary filmmakers and they have responsibilities to us; these are also issues that you, as a documentary filmmaker, will have to face and take into consideration. We can break these down into responsibilities the filmmaker (or you) have to the truth, the audience and the subject.

DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKERS' RESPONSIBILITIES TO A TRUTH

- Documentary filmmakers need to take every step to make sure that the story they are telling is true and factual.
- Documentary filmmakers need to make sure that their own opinions and judgments do not influence the film without the audience knowing it's an opinion.
- Do not claim or take credit for material the filmmaker did not make. This means things like archival footage (film from a film library etc) needs to be clearly identified and any music used must have permission or be copyright free and properly credited.

DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKERS' RESPONSIBILITIES TO THE AUDIENCE

- The audience needs to be able have faith in the "truth" of the film.
- Things like re-enactments (where actors play out a scenario) need to be clearly identified.
- Archival footage should be identified and be truthful to the time period.

DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKERS' RESPONSIBILITIES TO THE SUBJECT

- First and most importantly, the documentary filmmaker must do no harm to the less powerful or abuse their position of power.
- The filmmaker needs to protect their subject and not expose them to danger.
- The filmmaker needs to respect the convention of "off the record". Sometimes a source will speak to the filmmaker to give background information or explain an action confidentially and not want to be quoted. For example, they may say "officially she did not do it but off the record I know she did". In this case, the filmmaker could not use the quote – but they have been given information they can follow up on without letting people know where they heard it.
- The filmmaker needs to have respect for the culture they are filming in and cultural issues. In Australia, there are specific documentary protocols (ways of operating) when working with Indigenous communities and people. See http://www.aftrs.edu.au/indigenous/consultation.
- The filmmaker must not try to trick the subject by using things like pretending the camera is off.
- The filmmaker must not ask questions that make the subject look bad (unless the subject really is bad). How would you answer if a filmmaker said "answer this question yes or no. Have you stopped stealing from supermarkets?"
- The filmmaker must use editing honestly. This means not rearranging the shots or cutting away to something unflattering. The TV show *Survivor* does this often – it will cut from an interview with a contestant to a snake crawling along, implying that the person is lying or is a snake about to betray a friend.
- The filmmaker must use sound honestly. For example, this means you should not edit in a different question to the one that was asked as a way to make the subject look bad or look like a liar. The filmmaker also should not edit together the answers from different questions. Use your voice-over honestly. While is it is perfectly acceptable to use music for a dramatic effect, music must be selected thoughtfully.

These are a combination of rules and guidelines. As documentary filmmaker, you need to protect your sources and subjects and show them respect. Of course, if they are guilty or you were making a documentary about bullying, you may treat the bully and the victims differently; but both need to be shown respect. Always treat people in a documentary you make as you would like to be treated.

WORKSHEET

1 Watch the Errol Morris video again and answer the following questions:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7-XIKHTRfn4

a) Does Morris believe the truth can be told?

b) Why does he call it the ugly truth?

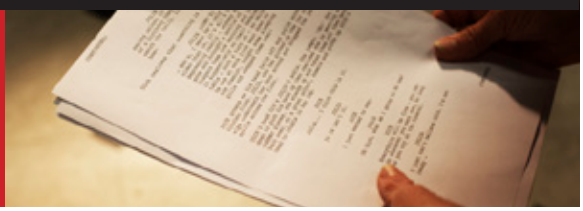
c) Why does Morris think re-enactments are important? What do you think?

d) Can you think of an instance where a re-enactment might be wrong, in bad taste or deceptive?

2 Imagine you are interviewing your year level co-ordinator about the school's mobile phone policy. Choose two songs to be played over footage of the co-ordinator walking into their office. One that would make the policy seem reasonable and one to make the policy seem unreasonable.

SECTION 5

MOCKUMENTARY



The word mockumentary comes from combining the words **mock** and **documentary**. Mock has two meanings which can both apply here. It can mean to make fun of and it can also mean fake. So, when we join it with documentary, we get a fake documentary which also pokes fun at the documentary form itself.

A mockumentary is usually a satire, and satire is using humour to draw attention to, criticise or mock someone or something (like an institution or system). The way satire does this is through parody. Parody is using conventions or stylistic techniques to imitate a genre – in this case documentary – often to make fun of the subject or to make a point.

So, we can see satire usually relates to the content and parody to the style.

The first film to be called a mockumentary was *This is Spinal Tap* (1984). This film was about a mythical heavy metal band called Spinal Tap, and the film was presented as a documentary following them on tour, their break up and reforming. *This is Spinal Tap* used documentary conventions, codes and styles (particularly cinema verite) and used them so well that many people thought it was a genuine documentary about a real band.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N63XSUpe-0o

Even the trailer for *This is Spinal Tap* parodied genuine trailers, and in this trailer we can see a number of documentary conventions and codes.

Since *This is Spinal Tap* was released, mockumentary has become a popular genre. The Spinal Tap people have made a number of other mockumentaries including *Best in Show* and *A Mighty Wind*. While mockumentary had its start in cinema, it is also popular in television with shows such as *The Office*, *Parks and Rec*, *Summer Heights High* and *American Vandal*, amongst others.

Making a mockumentary can be quite difficult. Comedy is always one of the most difficult genres to pull off successfully. For the parody to be successful, the maker must be very familiar with the documentary style being imitated or mocked.

MOCKUMENTARY STYLE

Just as with other documentary genres, mockumentary has its own defining style, stylistic features, conventions and codes.

- The structure of a mockumentary is the same as a normal documentary or narrative film. There is a beginning, a middle and an end. The beginning introduces us to the characters and the question, dilemma or problem; the middle poses more questions, more investigations take place and problems are encountered; and (just like nearly all film and television) a mockumentary doesn't just stop, it ends with a conclusion where the questions are resolved and the problems are overcome.
- The people appearing in a mockumentary are actors – this is a major difference to a documentary.
- The dialogue is often improvised. In films like *This is Spinal Tap,* the actors are given a detailed character study of their characters likes, dislikes, motivations, past history and so on. The scenes are written as detailed stories and the actors improvise their dialogue. This obviously takes a lot of time and skill, so most television mockumentaries are scripted.
- It usually follows the codes and conventions of the observational "fly on the wall" documentary style.
- The characters often acknowledge the camera and the crew, and they often speak directly to the camera or to an interviewer.
- The camera is often hand-held and moves around following characters.
- The lighting is usually realistic and imitates the available light that would be there.
- A mockumentary uses little or no music apart from over the titles. Music and most of sounds are "justified" – that is they are either the sounds that would naturally be there or are motivated by a character that is (for example when a band is on the stage or a radio or television is seen to be switched on). There may be a voice-over from the imaginary filmmaker.
- It is rarely shot on a stage or set. A mockumentary is usually shot on location; or, if a set is used, it is made to look like a location – unlike say a soap opera or sit-com where there is no concern if the set looks like a set.
- It often uses archival footage to give the impression of it being real; or it may use old photos of the characters, giving the viewer the illusion that the character is a real person in a real documentary.

A mockumentary works by creating the illusion that what the viewer is watching is real and to achieve this it has to closely imitate the style of documentaries themselves.

WORKSHEET

1 What are two main differences between a documentary and a mockumentary?

2 Look at the following trailers for mockumentaries:

Best in Show (2000) Christopher Guest – USA
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=94y9n9lNy2Y

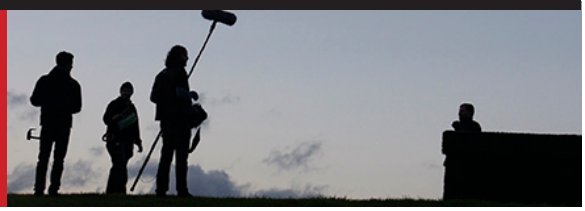
What we do in the Shadows (2014),
Jemaine Clement, Taika Waititi – New Zealand
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IAZEWtyhpes

What documentary techniques and styles can you see in each?
You should have at least four for each clip.

3 Script a one minute opening sequence for a mockumentary about your school.

SECTION 6

WHY AM I MAKING THIS?



Now that we have looked at documentary history, genres and styles, it's time to start making your own documentary. The most obvious and fundamental questions of course are:

What will I make it about and why am I making it at all?

These are questions that are asked by every documentary filmmaker no matter how many films they have made.

One of the most important things in making a documentary is finding an issue, person, place or topic that you care about. Really care about, not just think is an OK topic but one that means something to you. This doesn't have to be an earth-shattering issue that will save the world, but if it doesn't mean something to you it's hard to see it meaning something to an audience. It can be quite overwhelming and nearly impossible to think up something to make a documentary about on the spot. A good way to start is to make some lists. Try writing out five things that mean something to you. It could be as grand a theme as the environment or something like music, your hobby, a sport you play, your family – anything that is important to you. Then brainstorm why you care about each one of these.

The next stage is to think of some key questions that will move your documentary forward.

For example, say you were passionate about your local sporting club but the council was planning to close it down and sell the land. This would be a great story for a documentary. Some of your key questions might be: what does the sport mean to you and the community? Why is the council selling the land? Who is buying the land and what would that mean to the community? Finally, what can be done about it? This gives you an outline or skeleton to build on. The next steps might then be finding finding out who could answer these questions. This process can be used for any topic.

https://youtu.be/LQFzxTkYyoQ

"Journey To" is a short, animated documentary by then Melbourne secondary student Cheng-Yee Choe. It is the story of her mother's journey as a refugee from Vietnam to Australia. It is a personal, family story she wanted to tell, but it also tells us about family, war and refugees.

The next thing a documentary filmmaker needs to consider is their audience.

Why will an audience want to watch (or keep watching) your film?

This idea of audience is a critical one and will shape your documentary. In the case of the example above, will your audience be members of the club? The council? Or the wider community? Your approach to the topic will probably differ depending on the audience. The club members will know the issue already and will want to know how to stop the development. The council might need to know the history of the club and its place in the local community. Meanwhile, the wider community will need a broader view taking in both perspectives.

As we have seen in previous sections, there are two main ways to engage an audience: content and style. While these are of course linked, we need to look at them separately.

Content
What you are saying and why you are saying it. What is your perspective on the topic, what shape do you think the story will take? What are the key questions and who will answer them?

Style
If content is the 'what' of a documentary, then style is the 'how' – this is how the content is presented to the audience. The style of the documentary is something you have complete control over, and it will be the result of a series of conscious decisions by you. One of the first is what genre of documentary you will be making – will you be shooting it "fly on the wall", will it be "invisible" style, David Attenborough style or will there be voice-over? Will you appear in it in the personal documentary style?

These questions of content and style will give you a base to work from when you tackle the next section: planning your documentary.

WORKSHEET

1 Use the table below to brainstorm three ideas for a documentary you would like to make. Be realistic – it is very unlikely you will have the funds to make a film about polar bears and climate change. Think about a hobby you have, something you are passionate about, a local school or community issue, a person you know and admire or someone in your family or local community that has led an interesting life.

IDEAS	POSITIVES	CHALLENGES
Idea 1		
Idea 2		
Idea 3		

2 Use the following to further develop your idea. Start by summing up your idea in no more than three sentences.

My idea for a documentary is....

My target audience is....

DEVELOPING YOUR IDEA

Using these keywords, write down how you will use them to create your documentaries content.

I will investigate....

I will develop or analyse....

The key questions my documentary will look at are:
(Use as many as you think are necessary, these are a guide only)

1

2

3

4

DEVELOPING YOUR STYLE

Using these keywords, write down how you will use them to create your documentary's style.

The genre will be....

My influences or inspirations are....

USING TECHNICAL CODES

Ideas for using the following codes.

Locations

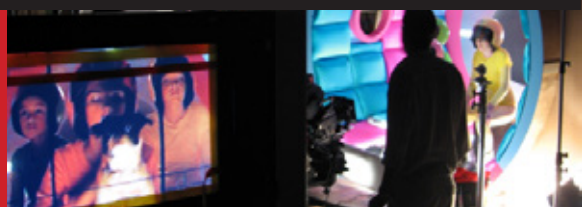
Lighting

Sound

Camera

SECTION 7

PLANNING YOUR DOCUMENTARY



Now that you have your idea, it's time to move into the next stage of the documentary process: **pre-production**. The pre-production phase is essentially the planning process and it involves all the paperwork necessary before you move into the actual production phase.

This planning stage is as important as the actual filming. You need to make sure you and your crew arrive at the right place at the right time with the right equipment, knowing why you are there, what and who you will be filming, what questions you are going to ask and what you will do when you are there.

Pre-production for a documentary usually follows this process: a synopsis, a treatment, a script and a production schedule. Each of these has an important role to play; each one gives more detail and fleshes out the one that went before.

Synopsis

This is usually a short description of the main theme of your film. It can be as short as a single sentence or as long as a paragraph. It sums up what you are planning to do. The synopsis for your film could be something like this:

> *The Billabong City Council is closing down the community centre but one girl is standing up to them. Can Amber Cheng save the centre?*

Treatment

This is an expanded version of your synopsis. It will cover where and what you will film, who you will interview, the key questions you will ask, if you will be using other material like old photos, old footage, using re-enactments and so on. The treatment is a description of the film you want to make and a guideline for your crew. It may also include your target audience. The beginning of a treatment for the above synopsis might be:

> *Open on the Billabong community centre. The centre has had a long history in the city of Billabong and we see archival photos from the 1950's to the present day. The centre has been at the heart of Billabong's community and its citizens have fond memories of happy times there. We see vox pops of a range of Billabong's citizens outside the centre (a vox pop is an informal interview usually only one or two sentences long) saying what the centre means to them. When the council decided to close it down, they did not count on the resistance of one schoolgirl, Amber Cheng. We see an interview with Amber at the Council Chambers.*

Script

The script is like the recipe for a cake or a set of plans. It is the way you, as the filmmaker, see the film's shape, and it is instructions to your crew such as the camera operator. Unlike a fiction film where all the dialogue and action is set out and the cast and crew stick to it, in a documentary you don't know exactly how your questions will be answered; your story may take an unexpected direction. But you always need a script because without it you and your crew will be lost. The start of the script for our Billabong Council documentary might look like this:

NAME OF FILM: BILLABONG'S SHAME
DIRECTOR: DUSTY RHODES

SHOT	VISUALS	TIME	AUDIO
1 Montage (a montage is collection of still or moving images)	Archival Photos of Billabong Cultural Centre (BCC) 50's – now	00:15	V/O – music under *For over 70 years the people of Billabong have...*
2 Close-up	Vox pop 1	00:05	Answer to question from off camera *What does the BCC mean to you?*
3 Close-up	Vox pop 2	00:05	"
4 Mid-shot	Amber Cheng on steps of Town Hall	00:30	Answer to question from off camera *What does the BCC mean to you?* Amber responds

Production schedule

This is a vital piece of planning. You really want your crew, your interviewees, and your equipment to all be in the same place at the same time. Your schedule needs to include who, where, what equipment, approximate timing (apart from the start of the day which needs to be made clear) and everyone's contact details. Our production schedule would look like this:

NAME OF FILM: BILLABONG'S SHAME
DIRECTOR: DUSTY RHODES

PRODUCTION SCHEDULE

Dates of shoot	May 12-16	Day 1
Locations	Tiger St, Billabong Town Hall, Billabong Cultural Centre	
Contact details	Director: Dusty Camera: Georgia	Phone: 555 123 Phone: 555 124
Equipment	Camera, Tripod, Mics, Batteries, Headphones, extension cables, reflectors, leads and snacks	

SHOOTING SCHEDULE

Time	**People involved**	**Location**	**Other information**
9.30 am	Crew	Tiger St	Vox pops
10.00 am	Crew and Amber	Town Hall	

WORKSHEET

1 Write out the synopsis of your film in no more than three sentences

2 Write out the treatment for your film. Show it to two other people to see if they understand what you are planning to do. You may want to incorporate their feedback.

3 Complete the script and production schedules on the following pages.

DOCUMENTARY SCRIPT: PLANNING

Name of film: **Director:**

SHOT	VISUALS	TIME	AUDIO

DOCUMENTARY SCRIPT: PLANNING

Name of film: **Director:**

SHOT	VISUALS	TIME	AUDIO

PRODUCTION SCHEDULE

Name of film: **Director:**

Dates of shoot			Day 1
Locations			
Contact details	Director: Camera:	Phone: Phone:	
Equipment			

SHOOTING SCHEDULE

Time	People involved	Location	Other information

SECTION 8

SHOOTING YOUR DOCUMENTARY

Now it's time to put what you have planned into action. You have completed all the pre-production, but it's still not time to just grab a camera and start shooting. The temptation to start shooting can be great, after all it's meant to be about capturing reality, right? So, I'll just start filming and see what I come up with. Actually, that's the way to make a boring and aimless film. You have a plan – the script – t hat you need to stick to, but don't be completely inflexible. Sometimes something will happen that you did not plan, so be prepared.

Four of the most important aspects of a shoot are the location, the camera, lighting and sound.

LOCATION

The location is very important: it sets the scene, establishes the mood and allows your audience to draw conclusions about both the story and the people in the documentary. You are making a statement if you film standing in front of a police station – someone is obviously guilty. Poor choice of location can give you technical problems too.

- Do not film near a main road – as well as being visually distracting, you will get sound problems.
- Make sure there are no distractions in the background like dogs fighting and so on.
- Make sure you have permission to film there. In many places (i ncluding shopping centres, railway stations, private businesses and in some places local streets and parks) you will need to get permission. You or your teacher will have to find out what your local rules are. Most people are happy to help students, so just ask. It is usually better if you try to get permission in person rather than by email – the presence of a school uniform can work wonders.

CAMERA

Shot selection is an important part of film language.

- Long shot: this establishes the location and places of the subject in relationship to their environment. Often, we use long shots to set the scene.
- Mid-shot: this is the most common shot as it gives us information about the subject, their location and their relationship to others.
- Close-up: this focuses our attention and is often used as a reaction shot.
- Extreme close-up: this shot gives great significance to the object being filmed and should not be used often.
- High angle: looking down on a subject makes them seem vulnerable and weak.
- Low angle: looking up at them makes them look powerful and intimidating.

Camera tips:

- Make sure the batteries are charged, carry spares if you can and, if filming inside, t ry to use power points.
- Use a tripod, only hand hold if slightly shaky is an effect you want and then your audience might not want it.

LIGHTING

While most of the time you will try to use available light, if your location is dark or there is strong contrast between light and shade you may need portable LED lighting.

- Do not shoot into the sun or with your subject against a window or with a bright l ight behind them. If you have to do this, then use a LED light as a fill light – the t orch in your phone will work.

SOUND

Sound is often taken for granted but obviously it is very important, your audience needs to hear!

- A microphone picks up sound equally so do not have an interview near other sound sources like a busy road, train line or crowd of people.
- Do not have a TV, radio or music in the background, the audience finds it very distracting.
- If you can, try to use headphones to monitor the sound.
- Listen carefully to what your interview subject is saying. While you have written questions in your script, be prepared to ask follow-up questions if your subject says something interesting. So, if your subject says something like “that’s when I tripped the umpire” follow it with “why did you do that?” – that’s what your audience wants to hear, not the next question about training.

Always, always review your footage after your shoot, either at the time or that night. That way you can pick up a problem and reshoot. Discovering the problem two weeks later in editing is too late.

WORKSHEET

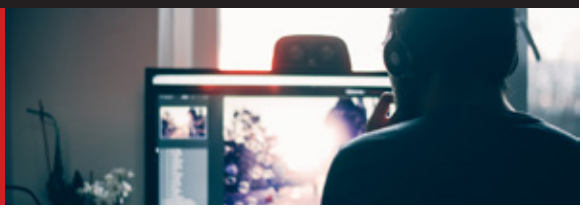
1 Write down when you think you will use the following shots in your documentary and why

SHOT TYPE	WHEN AND WHY I PLAN TO USE IT – OR NOT USE IT.
Long shot	
Mid-shot	
Close up	
Extreme close-up	
High angle	
Low angle	
Eye level	

2 Go ahead and start shooting your film!

SECTION 9

POST- PRODUCTION: WHAT HAPPENS AFTER THE SHOOT



You have finished your shoot and now you need to move to post-production. The very first thing you need to do is to back up your footage to an external hard drive, USB drive or a network. The other piece of advice is to save often.

At its simplest, editing is arranging the shots, but it's much more than this. As an editor it is your job to make the story flow and engage an audience – remember, one of the key reasons you are making this documentary is for an audience. One of the main mistakes students make is to make their film too long. Just think, how many student films have you wished went for longer? In most cases they would be better if they were a bit shorter. A good length to keep your audience engaged is four to six minutes. As editor, you will have to "kill your darlings" as the advice to writers goes. That means there will be shots and sound bites that you love, but if they stand in the way of the story flowing, get rid of them – your film will be better for it.

You will have your script to guide you, but you will have certainly shot more footage than you had planned. It can be quite daunting to look at an hour or more of footage and think "how am I ever going to get that down to five minutes". The best way to start is to log your footage and then you will have a rough paper edit – there is a template for this on page 42. This paper edit is time consuming, but it really pays off and saves you a lot of time and trouble when editing.

When it comes to editing software, there is a wide range to choose from: there is iMovie for Apple and Movie Creator for Windows. Your school might have a preferred program already installed and there are many available on the web. If you are having problems with any program, there are also online tutorials and forums to help you.

There are important ethical points to consider when you are editing. In section four, we looked at documentary truth and ethics in theory. Now you need to put that truth into practice. You owe it to your subjects and the audience to be truthful when you are telling the story.

Much of your soundtrack will be what was recorded on the scene by your camera. It is possible to enhance your film by adding sound effects, but this can be an ethical grey area. Are you telling the truth by adding sounds that weren't there when you shot the footage? Adding sounds like a police siren or gun shots can mislead your audience. It is a question only you can answer. The same applies to editing dialogue. Changing dialogue to make an interviewee look good or bad is called a Frankenbite - a word made from combining Frankenstein and soundbite. An example might be:

Original	**Frankenbite**
"I don't see anything wrong with cleaning the beach, we are sick of people dropping rubbish."	"I don't see anything wrong with people dropping rubbish."

It is a rare documentary that does not use music at all, even if it's only over the titles; but again there are some ethical issues with using music. In Australian schools, you have permission to use copyright music, but this is only for classroom use.

What if your documentary is so good you want to enter it into student award festivals or show it publicly? In this case, you need to get permission from the copyright holder (often very difficult), make an original soundtrack by yourself or with friends or use Creative Commons copyright free music. There a number of Creative Commons sites that will come up in a web search. Here is a place to start:

https://creativecommons.org/about/program-areas/arts-culture/%20arts-culture-resources/legalmusicforvideos/

https://creativecommons.org/about/program-areas/arts-culture/%20arts-culture-resources/music-communities/

Another good resource for sound effects is from the BBC – free to use for students

http://bbcsfx.acropolis.org.uk

Most of the creative commons musicians are happy for you to use their music, all they ask is to be credited – which brings us to your credits. There will be many people that have helped in the making of your film: your interviewees, people who have given you permissions, your crew and others. It is important to acknowledge their contribution – now be sure to spell their names right!

WORKSHEET

1 This clip is a trailer for a documentary about Civil Rights in America.
Watch it and answer the following questions.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qVw5RgZjBKs

a) How has the director used archival footage? Why do you think they chose this footage?

b) Why do you think it transitions from black and white to colour?

c) What effect do the text inserts have?

d) Look at any 30 seconds from the clip. Count how many shots there are and how long they go for.

e) Why do you think this particular song was chosen? Do you think it was a good choice? Why?

f) How would you describe the rhythm or pace of this clip?

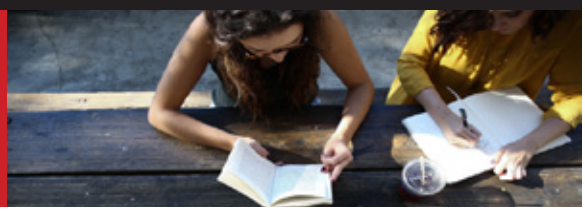
2 Use the template to make a paper edit using the example below.

TIME IN	TIME OUT	VISION	AUDIO	COMMENTS
0:00:00	0:00:30	Amber on steps take 1	Hello I'm Amber Cheng .... the council	No good – truck noise
0:00:30	0:01:00	Amber steps take 2	"	She sneezes
0:01:00	0:01:30	Amber steps take 3	"	Good

TIME IN	TIME OUT	VISION	AUDIO	COMMENTS

SECTION 10

I THINK I'M FINISHED... NOW WHAT?



It is very rare for a film to be called finished after just one edit. Most filmmakers think of the first edit as a rough cut. Often the filmmaker and editor are too close to the film and make assumptions about how the audience will read, react or understand the content and the film as a whole. Maybe they have not been able to "kill their darlings".

It is always good practice to get a fresh pair of eyes to have a look and give feedback. The best people to give you feedback are people who have not been involved with the making of the film at all. Your teacher is a good starting point, so are your family and friends, but it is important that they feel comfortable giving honest, critical feedback. It can be hard accepting criticism, but your film will be the better for it. You can use the template on page 42 or make one online using Survey Monkey or something similar. You really need to have specific questions for the feedback to be helpful, just asking "what did you think?" will not be much help.

After you have received your feedback and acted on it, if you think it was helpful you will need to evaluate it for yourself (and probably for your teacher). This involves asking yourself what went right? What went wrong? What you liked, what you did not like, how the crew performed their jobs and what you would do differently. There is a template on page 45.

Now that it is finally finished and you have received and incorporated feedback and evaluated it, what do you do with your film? Many schools will hold a viewing night where family and friends can come and share your experiences. With the help of your teacher, you could organise a mini-festival of the class's documentaries in a suitable area of the school.

There are also many student film festivals that are always looking for good student films – and of course your film is great! Here is a list of some of them, but remember that you will need to have cleared any material that you did not create yourself such as music, sound effects and so on, as well as having the signed release forms. Two of the biggest student film competitions are:

The ATOM Awards which are run by the professional association of Media teachers in Australia are one of the world's longest running student awards
http://atomawards.org/

The Australian Centre for the Moving Image runs Screen It which is a student short film festival
https://www.acmi.net.au/events/screen-it/

There are many more film festivals that often have specific entry requirements, including local councils. They can be found with a simple web search.

WORKSHEET

1 Have at least three people fill out a feedback form and after you have received their feedback complete the final cut of your film.

Feedback form for:

What do you think you learned from this film?

My reaction to the film was:

☐ Very favourable ☐ Favourable ☐ Unfavourable ☐ Not sure

My reasons are...

The film length was:

☐ Too long ☐ A bit long ☐ Just right ☐ Too short

My reasons are...

What do you think could be changed to make it better?

2 Self-evaluation – you can use this table or just use the questions as prompts and write in a separate document.

What went right?

What went wrong?

What do you like about the film?

What don't you like about the film?

How did the crew perform their jobs?

Score the following out of 10

Camera: _____ out of 10 Lighting: _____ out of 10 Sound: _____ out of 10

What would you do differently next time?

Describe how the group worked together

CONCLUSION

Congratulations on completing your documentary and learning about documentary history and theory. We hope you will go on to make many more and maybe become an award-winning filmmaker.

One of the best ways is to watch more documentaries. Here is a list of some you might like. Please check the classification ratings as this can change depending on whether you watch them online, on DVD or television.

- **Man with a Movie Camera**
  1929, Dziga Vertov – Russia
- **Cane Toads**
  1988, Mark Lewis – Australia
- **Dogtown and Z Boys**
  2001, Stacey Peralta – America
- **Thin Blue Line**
  1988, Errol Morris – America
- **Utopia**
  2013, John Pilger – Australia
- **Gayby Baby**
  2015, Maya Newell – Australia
- **Bowling for Columbine**
  2002, Michael Moore – America
- **Exit through the Gift Shop**
  2010, Banksy – UK
- **Making a Murderer**
  2015, Netflix Series – America
- **Chasing Asylum**
  2016, Ova Orner – Australia
- **The First Australians**
  2008, SBS TV – Australia
- **Sherpa**
  2015, Jennifer Peedom – Australia