



**What Makes a Documentary a Documentary?:
What Filmmakers Have to Say**
A Media Literacy Mini Unit

INTRODUCTION

It was once rare for a documentary film to be released in mainstream theaters, but that is beginning to change. Given the growing influence of documentaries, it is important that students have the skills to understand and analyze these information sources.

This series of activities is designed to help develop what Common Core Standards advocates call “close reading skills” as they apply to documentary film. The activities utilize not only POV films, but also POV’s extraordinary archive of interviews with many of the world’s most accomplished documentary filmmakers.

The activities can be used together to create a mini unit, or individually to supplement existing curriculum. The activities are especially appropriate for:

- Teaching students to assess the credibility of sources
- Deepening students’ understanding of film as an art form
- Strengthening students’ media literacy analysis skills
- Preparing students to produce their own videos

GRADE LEVELS

Secondary and up

MAIN OBJECTIVES**

Students who complete all activities will:

- Understand the difference between a documentary and a news report
- Understand that “truth” is a complex concept that is different from “accuracy”
- Practice listening skills, writing and speaking
- Engage in close reading of a media “text”

** See the end of this document for correlations to Common Core Standards.

VOCABULARY

documentary, documentarian, genre, fiction, non-fiction, accuracy, objective, subjective, propaganda

MATERIALS

Access to the POV website: www.pov.org

Paper and pen

News still photo (for Activity 1)

Handout: [Documentary and News Report](#) (PDF file)

ACTIVITY 1: CONVENTIONS (10 minutes)

One of the ways to distinguish between media genres is to identify the unique techniques that each genre uses to communicate its messages. We call the set of techniques used by each genre its “conventions.” To help students understand the concept of conventions and gain awareness of how conventions influence interpretation, do the following:

- a) Tell students to imagine that they are surfing TV channels to find a newscast. They recognize a newscast and stop on that channel. Ask each student to sketch *quickly* on a piece of scrap paper what is on the screen where he or she stopped, noting that this part of the activity should be done without talking and that there will be an opportunity to discuss their pictures in a moment.
- b) Give students 30 to 60 seconds to complete their sketches. The idea here is to record their initial snapshots, not to create artistic masterpieces.
- c) When time is up, ask students to hold up their pictures so they can all see one another’s work. Invite the class to create a list of the most common features (e.g., a person, a desk, a screen over a person’s shoulder, text scrolling across the bottom of the screen). Note that the things on the list are visual cues we use as shortcuts to identify news programs. Those cues are conventions of the genre.
- d) If time allows, the class may generate a list of additional news conventions (e.g., certain camera angles, lighting, editing, interview style, the ways in which reporters are integrated). You might also point out and discuss stereotypes by asking about the gender or race of the news anchors in students’ pictures or discussing what anchors are wearing and what messages that clothing communicates.
- e) To underscore the notion that conventions are a set of techniques that convey particular messages, show a still picture that looks like a newscast but is actually a spoof (e.g., *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* or the Weekend Update segment from *Saturday Night Live*—it’s best to select something students will recognize). Talk a little bit about why people might choose to make something that looks like a newscast, but isn’t. Answers might include humor, commentary or lending an air of authority or truth to the message being conveyed.
- f) Finish this activity by asking students which media genres besides the news provide information about social issues. If no student suggests documentary, add

the word to their list and inform them that they are going to be doing a mini unit on documentaries and their conventions. Together the class is going to examine what makes a documentary a documentary and whether or not documentaries tell the truth.

ACTIVITY 2: IDENTIFYING DOCUMENTARY TECHNIQUES (20 minutes)

Prepare in advance to show a 5- to –10-minute clip from a documentary by choosing an age- and subject-appropriate documentary from POV's collection. There are always films streaming for free on the [POV website \(www.pov.org\)](http://www.pov.org). Educators can also borrow copies of selected films from [POV's lending library \(www.pbs.org/pov/outreach/amdoc/events/index.php\)](http://www.pbs.org/pov/outreach/amdoc/events/index.php).

- a) Begin the viewing process by asking students whether or not they have ever seen a documentary. Ask them to share briefly what they have seen and their reactions. Ask them what they think of when they hear the term “documentary” and instruct them to keep those ideas in mind as they view the clip. Assign them to look for conventions of the documentary form, i.e., what do they notice that lets them know they are watching a documentary and not some other media genre, such as a TV drama or a Hollywood film. This can be presented to advanced students as an open-ended task—just ask them what they notice. If the students are not familiar with media analysis, you may want to suggest that they keep these things in mind:
 - What is the topic? Is it something you would expect to see in a newscast or a newspaper?
 - Who tells the story?
 - What types of shots are used?
 - Who or what is on screen most of the time?
 - Are the images contemporaneous (vérité)? A re-enactment? Representational? Something else?
- b) Show the clip, pausing to discuss or point out salient features as you go. If necessary, remind students that they are meant to be analyzing how the clip is constructed rather than the filmmakers' message(s).
- c) Wrap up this activity by having the class generate a list of things that distinguish documentaries from other genres of film/video. Let students know that it is okay if the list isn't totally comprehensive or if there are items they aren't sure are accurate.

ACTIVITY 3: GOING TO THE ULTIMATE SOURCE (45 minutes in class, plus out of class assignments)

By now, students should begin to identify a few things that distinguish a documentary from a news report. They may notice that both forms use interviews, but the length of those interviews tends to be longer in a documentary. Or they may notice that news

reporters try to separate themselves personally from their subjects, while documentarians often share personal stories and are interested in conveying particular perspectives rather than making sure that all possible voices are heard. They may notice that documentaries use film as an art form or use humor in ways that news does not.

This activity has three parts: 1. Watch an interview together as a class. 2. Watch an interview independently and summarize its main points. 3. Use filmmaker interviews to come up with a list of features common to documentaries.

Inform students that they are going to continue to delve into what makes documentaries unique and are going to learn from the best possible source—documentary filmmakers!

Part 1:

Tell students they are going to watch an interview with documentary filmmaker **Freida Lee Mock** (available at www.pbs.org/pov/behindthelens/video_freidaleemock.php) and ask them to listen for the answers to two questions:

1. What are the purposes of documentary films?
2. Do documentary films tell the truth?

Watch the 15-minute interview together as a class. This will provide students a chance to practice so that they can watch and analyze interviews by themselves later on.

After viewing the interview, discuss what students learned that might help them answer the two questions that you initially posed. You might also want to highlight these quotes from the interview with Mock and discuss what they mean:

“I thought that documentaries were a way to shine a light on the need for reform.”

“As a filmmaker, I don’t think of the work as overtly political. It’s more of a storytelling about an idea that also has social, political complexities.”

Part 2:

Assign students to watch filmmaker interviews by themselves (either during or outside of class) and be prepared to answer the two questions posed in Part 1 about the interviews they watch. Answers may be presented orally or in writing—you can decide based on the skills you’d like students to practice.

You can assign everyone to watch the same interview or have each student choose an interview from a list that you create of interviews with filmmakers who have made films on topics related to your curriculum. (You can search POV films by topic to find relevant selections.) Alternately, let students choose from the recommendations listed below. Advanced students may be asked to compare and contrast two of these interviews.

Natalia Almada

www.pbs.org/pov/elvelador/interview.php

Almada, who has made several films about Mexican history and life in the U.S./Mexico border region, raises issues about documentary film as an art form as well as the responsibility of a filmmaker to be sensitive to her subjects. She also discusses sound editing and what choices best represent the events she documented. (28 minutes)

Louis Alvarez and Andrew Kolker

www.pbs.org/pov/behindthelens/video_alvarezkolker.php

This pair of filmmakers, whose first POV film explored American language and dialect, examines the difference between being “accurate” and being “objective,” the role of humor and changes in technology. (16 minutes)

Alan Berliner

http://www.pbs.org/pov/behindthelens/video_alanberliner.php

Berliner, who uses home movies and his own family’s experiences to explore what we all can “learn from the life of an ordinary person,” talks about the value of storytelling and how he approaches filmmaking as if he were assembling a collage. (23 minutes)

Katrina Browne

www.pbs.org/pov/tracesofthetrade/interview.php

A first-time filmmaker discusses her personal family journey, which intersects with a major topic in American history (the slave trade), and examines trust issues between filmmaker and subjects, as well as who gets to tell stories and what difference it makes to have access to different voices. (2 minutes)

Marshall Curry

www.pbs.org/pov/ifatreefalls/interview.php

The film Curry discusses here examines whether or not the Earth Liberation Front is a terrorist organization. In the interview, he looks at the balance between being a journalist, an artist and a storyteller who purposefully includes conflicting perspectives in order to stretch people’s points of view, “nudge” them out of their comfort zones and “elevate the conversation a little bit and have people discuss it and think about it in a more nuanced and more complex way.” (21 minutes)

Judith Helfand

www.pbs.org/pov/behindthelens/video_judithhelfand.php

Helfand, who has made films about women’s health and also important events in U.S. history, explores the power of speaking from personal experience. She explains how documentaries can be used to change and

reform society and how films move viewers from inaction to action. She also discusses the psychological and emotional impact of good films—“Good films talk to people in ways that documents can’t”—and the perils of revealing people’s private moments. (22 minutes)

Laura Poitras

http://www.pbs.org/pov/oath/video_interview.php

Poitras reflects on her extraordinary interview with Osama bin Laden’s bodyguard and how using documentary film to listen to and humanize the enemy can provide insights into “roads not taken.” (23 minutes)

Marco Williams and Whitney Dow

www.pbs.org/pov/twotownsofjasper/interview.php

This team explores reactions to a hate crime, how those reactions differed by race and how their own race affected the filmmaking process. They also discuss “intimate human stories that help explicate broader societal issues” and how “documentaries are valuable tools for helping us better understand the strengths and weakness of what it means to be human.” They see their film as “challenging its viewers to confront difference, to understand their differences and to compel them to talk and take action to effect change in their lives, their communities, their/our world.”

As time allows, invite students to share with one another what they learned from the interviews about the purpose and the truth of documentaries. Guide them to explore:

- The difference between accuracy and truth
 - The difference between objective and subjective
 - The difference between subjective material and propaganda
 - The difference between sharing one’s own perspective and telling the whole truth about an issue or event
 - The role of evidence in determining whether all perspectives are equally valid
 - The techniques that documentary filmmakers use to show reality (especially when merely pointing the camera and recording cannot fully capture an experience)
- a) **Part 3:** (30 minutes in class plus out of class research) To expose students to the views of many filmmakers, have each student search the POV archive of filmmaker interviews: <http://www.pbs.org/pov/filmmakers/filmmaker-interviews.php#.UMiWhaypKAo> and locate a filmmaker who interests him or her. To ensure that they don’t all choose the same filmmaker, you can divide the class into groups and limit each group’s choices to a part of the alphabet (so group one can only choose filmmakers whose surnames begin with the letters A-F, the next group G-L and so on).

Teaching Tip: Most of the interviews include film clips. Several are also transcribed. If your purpose is to have students practice listening skills, you may want to insist that they watch their interviews rather than reading them.

- b) Assign students to watch or listen to interviews and note answers to the following:
- What specific kinds of filmmaking issues or challenges does the filmmaker consider?
 - What are the filmmaker's main purposes for making documentary films?
 - What does the filmmaker think makes documentary films special or different from other media forms?
- c) Have students share their notes on a class wiki or some other sort of master document that can be accessed by everyone. As a class, discuss the portrait that emerges of documentarians and what makes documentaries unique sources of information.

ACTIVITY 4: SCREEN A DOCUMENTARY

Using the topic search on the POV website, choose a documentary related to what you teach. To narrow the search, you may want to use the subject search tool under the Educators tab.

To prepare students for viewing, ask them how they might be able to determine whether or not a documentary is telling the truth. What questions would they ask?

Then introduce them to **Media Literacy Questions for Analyzing POV Films** (www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php). Have students use these questions, along with their own, to do close readings of the documentary. Pause the film every 10 to 15 minutes to conduct a group analysis of what students have seen so far.

After viewing, ask students whether the film seemed more like fiction or non-fiction. Be sure to ask them to provide evidence for their opinions. Advanced students may be asked to describe the point of view of the film and explain how a documentary differs from propaganda.

Then connect the film's content to your curriculum and explore how students' answers to questions about the film's methods and perspectives provide insight about both the subject of the film and the subject that the class has been studying. As time allows, invite students to discuss how news coverage of the film's topic would have differed from the approach taken by the documentary. What do they learn from this comparison about what documentaries do well that news does not and vice versa?

ASSESSMENTS or ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

1. Write or create a multimedia essay supporting the idea that documentary films tell a truth, but not *the* truth. Include and discuss at least one of the filmmaker quotes below as part of your essay:

“I’ve always thought that the domain of the authored documentary lies somewhere between the documentary and the essay. That’s been my definition for most of my life. We take something from journalism and something from the essay. But our work isn’t scientific, it’s a form of artistic work, so it’s subjective, a matter of ideas, intuitions, comparisons and the juxtaposition of interesting things.”

- **Patricio Guzmán**

“I think it’s important that we make programs that force people to think about what they’re seeing. They need to know that there’s a person behind the camera, that there’s a person who cut the story together, that it reflects a perspective. It’s important that we make programs that push people to ask questions and then come to their own conclusions or choose how to respond. More than anything, it’s important to ask people to think. I think it’s a disservice, in a sense, when we make media that doesn’t ask people to think but just tells them how they should feel and what they should do.”

- **Natalia Almada**

2. Watch a documentary and a news report from a mainstream television news source. Using the [News Story and Documentary](#) handout (PDF), ask students to complete the grid and write a one-page summary of their results that explains the major differences between a news story and a documentary.

For advanced students, you may want to include categories such as Hollywood film, reality TV show or instructional video in addition to or in place of news report. Advanced students may also be asked to add a paragraph or two explaining what a documentary achieves that news cannot and vice versa.

3. If students are not already familiar with media literacy, explain to them that media literacy education is based on the premise that the following things are true about media:

- All media messages are “constructed.”
- Each medium has different characteristics, strengths and a unique “language” of construction.
- Media messages are produced for particular purposes.
- All media messages contain embedded values and points of view.
- People use their individual skills, beliefs and experiences to construct their own meanings from media messages.
- Media and media messages can influence beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors and the democratic process.

Source: <http://namle.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/NAMLE-CPMLE-w-questions2.pdf>

After ensuring that everyone understands what each concept means, assign students to explain, either in writing or in oral presentations, how the filmmaker interview they listened to provided evidence to support one (or, for advanced students, all) of these concepts.

4. Invite students to produce—or storyboard—a short documentary. As students plan, have them consider how their story would unfold differently if they were creating a news report rather than a documentary. Invite them to reflect on how their production choices have been influenced by what they learned from the filmmaker interviews and class discussions.

RESOURCES

Aufderheide, Pat. *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Aufderheide, Pat. *POV*. “Social Issue Documentaries – A Mini-Curriculum.”
www.pbs.org/pov/behindthelens/lessonplan2.php

Juel, Henrik. “Defining Documentary Film.” *p.o.v.: The Danish Journal of Film Studies*, December 2006.
<http://akira.ruc.dk/~hjuel/Essays/DefiningDocu.htm>

National Association for Media Literacy Education. “Core Principles of Media Literacy Education in the U.S.”
<http://namle.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/NAMLE-CPMLE-w-questions2.pdf>

POV. “Media Literacy Questions for Analyzing POV Films.”
www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php#.UNOsmqypKAo

Scheibe, Cyndy and Faith Rogow. *The Teacher’s Guide to Media Literacy: Critical Thinking in a Multimedia World*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin 2011.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS FOR LITERACY IN HISTORY/SOCIAL STUDIES, SCIENCE, AND TECHNICAL SUBJECTS (<http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards/>)

Portrait of College and Career Ready Students:

- They work diligently to understand precisely what an author or speaker is saying, but they also question an author’s or speaker’s assumptions and premises and assess the veracity of claims and the soundness of reasoning.
- They value evidence. Students cite specific evidence when offering an oral or written interpretation of a text. They use relevant evidence when supporting their own points in writing and speaking, making their reasoning clear to the reader or listener, and they constructively evaluate others’ use of evidence.
- They use technology and digital media strategically and capably.
- They come to understand other perspectives and cultures.

6-12 Anchor Standards for the Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
8. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.
9. Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

6-12 Standards for Speaking and Listening

1. Initiate and participate in a range of collaborative discussions.
3. Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis and tone used.
4. Present information, findings and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning.
6. Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks.

6-12 Standards for Writing

1. Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts and information clearly and accurately.
4. Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience.
6. Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish and update individual or shared writing products.

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 and outreach for WSKG public television and radio.