

## COMM 4960/6960 - Documentary Writing

This course will examine the theory, techniques, and ethics of documentary storytelling in both moving picture media and audio. Students will explore and practice the special planning and writing that distinguishes documentary from fictional programs while also developing the skills and standards necessary to be effective creators and critical observers of documentaries.

### COURSE OBJECTIVES:

- To gain knowledge of the history, form, and story structure of documentary films
- To understand how to analyze and critique storytelling in documentary films
- To become proficient in visual writing for the documentary form
- To use a format and writing style appropriate to the medium
- To learn how to research and write a documentary outline, treatment, and proposal
- To organize and pitch a documentary project with confidence and clear communication

### TEXT:

Rosenthal, Alan; Eckhardt, Ned. Writing, Directing, and Producing Documentary Films and Digital Videos, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press. 2016

Additional readings will be posted on eCourseware

### Course Assignments:

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| 1.) Process Documentary Action Breakdown .....                 | 10% |
| 2.) Portrait/Interview Documentary w/treatment & outline ..... | 10% |
| 3.) Doc Promotional Project w/treatment & outline .....        | 10% |
| 4.) Final Project.....   | 30% |
| A. Logline and Synopsis  |     |
| B. Interview with transcription                                |     |
| C. Research Elements & Film Analysis                           |     |
| D. In-Class Pitch  |     |
| E. Treatment & Outline   |     |
| 5.) Written Documentary Exercises .....                        | 20% |
| 6.) Quizzes .....  | 20% |

Grade Scale: A+ (98-100) A (94-97) A- (90-93) B+ (87-89) B (84-86) B- (80-83) C+ (77-79)  
C (74-78) C- (70-73) D (60-69) F (59 and below)

### Assignment Descriptions

The **Process Documentary Action Breakdown** will require each student to observe a different process (for example: assembling a model airplane, repairing a car, cooking a meal, hunting a shark, etc.) and then write, in detail, the visual aspects of the process. This breakdown should pay attention to action, character, and location. At its core, the resulting document is a description of the visuals that an audience should expect to see on screen. Consider shot size, composition, and pacing without ever mentioning “shots” and camera moves directly in the treatment. The completed project will be a treatment.

The **Portrait/Interview Documentary** assignment will require students to interview one another in groups of two or three and then compose a short documentary narrative from the interview. The objective of this assignment is to understand how an interview can create the structure of a documentary and put this knowledge into direct practice. As with the process breakdown, visual writing is essential. The written requirements include a treatment and outline. The final results will be shared informally in class.

The **Doc Promotional Project** assignment will require each student to write a 1-2 minute, University of Memphis-based, documentary-style promotional video that is feasible to produce. It is possible that the completed treatments and outlines will be produced by the Corporate and Promotional Video Production class in the spring. The proposal should include an interview and on-location recording of a place/process. After completing individual promos, students will form groups, share ideas and select one to pitch to the class. The pitch should include a visual component such as a Power-point or Prezi.

The **Final Project** is the major documentary writing project for the course. Each student will create a thorough packet of materials for their documentary idea that will include a formal pitch, synopsis, research materials, a transcribed interview (either as research or to be included as part of the documentary), a treatment, and a detailed outline. Additionally, a reference documentary, with analysis, will be presented during class time before the formal pitch. Documentary ideas must be approved by the instructor before the assignment is begun. The work for this assignment should have the planned result of a documentary film that runs from 10-20 minutes in length. Production feasibility is highly encouraged.

**Written Exercises** will require students to expand their abilities to analyze and write about documentaries. This analytic writing will take place during and after class time. The expectations for each writing assignment will be discussed by the instructor.

**Quizzes** will test student abilities to consider and analyze documentary films in terms of theory and content. The format is typically short answer or short essay/analysis and will integrate readings.

**Honors & Graduate Student** work will be graded more strictly. In addition to the assignments above, Honors and Graduate students will be expected to deliver a two-part Audio Documentary assignment. Also, the Comprehensive Documentary Project will include a dual column script.

Additional information regarding each assignment will be discussed during class time.

## **GENERAL COURSE RULES**

**ATTENDANCE AND PUNCTUALITY:** More than two unexcused absences will cause your overall course grade to drop 1 percentage point per absence. If you are more than five minutes late to class, you will be counted as absent for that day.

*Unless cleared with the instructor,* the use of computers and mobile phones in the classroom will result in a deduction of .25 percentage points from your final grade for each use in class.

**DUE DATES:** Assignments are accepted only on the day they are due. If received on the due date past the *specified time*, the work will be accepted but with points deducted. Beyond the due date, no late work will be accepted.

**ACADEMIC DISHONESTY:** If you pass off the work of another writer, artist, or student as your own without proper attribution and communication with the instructor, you will receive an **F** on the specific assignment.

**COMMUNICATION:** THE BEST METHOD FOR CONTACTING THE INSTRUCTOR IS THROUGH EMAIL.

You are requested to check your email and eCourseware accounts regularly in an effort to have the latest information regarding class meetings and assignments.

**PARTICIPATION:** Contribution to classroom discussions and critiques is an important element of the learning process. More importantly, participation means providing constructive criticism that will assist your classmates in becoming better writers and producers. Please be aware that absences from group meetings and presentations is essential and will cause additional grade penalties.

**WEEKLY READING:** Required readings will be accessible online, typically eCourseware, and assigned over the course of the semester. Writing, Directing, and Producing Documentary Films and Digital Videos, will be a key text for the class and is available on the U of M library website. There will be additional readings outside of this book. Students should be prepared to consider and discuss the readings during class and in Writing Exercises/Quizzes.

**WARNING:** R-Rated and unrated audio/visual content will sometimes be screened during class time. This content may contain nudity, offensive language, and distressing material. By remaining enrolled, you acknowledge and accept this element of the course.

**DISABILITY ACCOMMODATION:** The Department of Communication cooperates with the Disability Resources for Students (DRS), at 110 Wilder Tower (901-678-2880) to make reasonable accommodations for qualified students (Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504, Rehabilitation Act). If you qualify, and have not registered with DRS, you are encouraged to do so. If you have a disability for which you will require accommodation under the terms of the Americans with Disabilities Act or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, please discuss your needs with the professor during the first week of class.

## Schedule:

### Week 1

Tues – August 27 – Definitions – Screening: Short doc samples & **WE #1**

Thur – August 29 – Discuss Reading – Process docs, elements for treatment & **WE #2**

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### Week 2

Tues – September 3 – Evaluating the Idea – Share process doc actions **Shot List 1 Due**

Thur – September 5 – Treatment writing pairs/groups. Doc screening. **Shot List 2 Due**

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### Week 3

Tues – September 10 – *Screen Doc*- Observation & Interview – **Process Doc Treatment Due**

Thur – September 12 – **Quiz 1 – Film Analysis** - Interview workshop – Portrait/Interview Doc

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### Week 4

Tues – September 17 – Group/Pair workshop – Portrait/Interview Documentary

Thur – September 19 – Interview Doc Wrap Up. Audio Doc & Narration. **WE #3**

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### Week 5

Tues – September 24 – **Interview Project Due w/presentation**

Thur – September 26 – Doc Promo Intro/Screening and **WE #4**

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### Week 6

Tues – October 1 – **Due: Individual Promotional Treatment/Outline** –Group Workshop

Thur – October 3 – Group Workshop – Promotional Video

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### Week 7

Tues – October 8 – **Pitch Promotional concepts to class w/on-screen visual**

Thur – October 10 – Discuss documentary ideas for final projects. **Quiz 2**

### Week 8

*Tues – October 15 – Fall Break*

Thur – October 17 – Screen documentary

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Week 9

Tues – October 22 – **Quiz 3-** Discuss final project ideas, budgeting, and reading

Thur – October 24 – Screen Student selected documentaries

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Week 10

Tues – October 29 – Screen Student selected documentaries

Thur – October 31 - Screen Student selected documentaries

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Week 11**Due: synopsis, research elements, and interview**

Tues – November 5 – Individual Meetings with Instructor about Final Project

Thur – November 7 – Individual Meetings with Instructor about Final Project

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Week 12**Outlines Due**

Tues – November 12 – **Individual Pitches (Part 1) – Outlines Due**

Thur – November 14 – **Individual Pitches (Part 2)**

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Week 13

Tues – November 19 – **Individual Pitches (Part 3)**

Thur – November 21 – **Individual Pitches (Part 4)**

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Week 14

Tues – November 26 – Screening and Discussion

Thur – November 28 - *NO CLASS MEETING – Thanksgiving Holiday*

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Week 15**Documentary Proposal Due w/Treatment**

Tues – December 3 – Course review, discussion, next steps

Thur – December 5 – STUDY DAY

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Week 16

Thur – December 12<sup>th</sup> – In-Class Analysis – **Quiz 4-** 8:00-10:00 AM

**Syllabus is subject to change at the discretion of the instructor.**