**Syllabus: COMM 4960/6960, Documentary Writing**

**Objectives**

The course will examine the theory, techniques, and ethics of documentary storytelling in film and television, exploring the special planning and writing that distinguishes the form from fictional programs. Students will be expected to develop the skills and standards they need to be effective creators and critical viewers of documentaries and to understand the importance of the form in the functioning of an educated democracy.

**Required Text**

*Documentary Storytelling: Creative Nonfiction on Screen*

by Sheila Curran Bernard; Third Edition

**Suggested Reading of Books and Periodicals**

*Writing, Directing, and Producing Documentary Films and Videos*

by Alan Rosenthal;Third Edition

Documentary International magazine published monthly by the

International Documentary Association — [www.documentary.org](http://www.documentary.org)

The Documentary Site online community — [www.documentarysite.com](http://www.documentarysite.com)

The D-Word online community — [www.d-word.com](http://www.d-word.com)

The New York Times — [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

**Writing Assignments**

1) Each student will conceive a documentary and write a plan for it in five steps,

concluding with a story outline. The forms and due dates of the various stages in this assignment will be discussed during class.

2) Each student will write a term paper that analyzes a documentary viewed outside class.

The form, objectives, and length of the paper will be discussed during class. The film chosen for the assignment must be approved in advance by the instructor.

3) Possible additional writing assignments will concern specific films, techniques, and

issues raised during the course. Content and due dates will be discussed in class.

**Additional Requirements for Graduate Students**

Graduate students enrolled in this course (COMM 6960) will be required, in addition to the assignments listed above, to write and deliver a presentation to the class demonstrating a high level of research and analysis. Each graduate student also will be required to schedule additional meetings with the instructor to discuss issues encountered in the student’s research and writing and to explore further the subjects raised in classroom discussions.

**Submitting Assignments**

Writing assignments must be submitted by email as attachments. Some assignments also will require printing. All writing submitted, whether electronic or hard copy, must have been checked and corrected for errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Any papers not copyedited will be returned, not graded.

**Due Dates Are Firm**

Once the deadlines have been announced in class, completed assignments must be submitted on the dates and at the times they are due. Papers submitted late will not be given full credit. The grade will be reduced one letter grade for each class meeting past the deadline that a paper is submitted.

**Software for Writing**

Although you are welcome to use screenwriting programs, none is required for the course. All assignments may be written in Microsoft Word or in a program that allows the file to be saved or exported in Word format before you submit it. However, if you want to learn screenplay formatting software, such as Final Draft, Movie Magic Screenwriter, or Montage, before you spend $100-$300 you should try the free program Celtx, which can be downloaded in both Macintosh and Windows versions ([www.celtx.com](http://www.celtx.com)). It doesn’t do everything that Final Draft does, but is fine for formatting the outline of a documentary.

**Grade Components**

Mid-Term Exam (Documentary Proposal/Plan) (30%)

Final Exam (Documentary Story Outline) (30%)

Term Paper (Documentary Critique) (20%)

Additional Writings and Quizzes (10%)

Participation in Class Discussions (10%)

**Exams**

There may be short quizzes on lectures and your textbook reading, but there will be no traditional midterm and final exams. The documentary proposal submission will serve as the midterm exam and the final draft of your story outline will serve as the final exam.

**Grading Scale**

**A+** (99-100) **A** (92-98)  **A-** (90-91)

**B+** (88-89) **B** (82-87) **B-** (80-81)

**C+** (78-79) **C** (72-77) **C-** (70-71)

**D+** (68-69) **D** (60-67) **F**  (59 and below)

**Participation**

An objective of this course is to improve one’s skills in writing, interviewing, researching, and planning by analyzing the work of others — viewing documentaries and discussing the issues they raise. We will strive to learn also by critiquing the writing-in-progress of fellow class members. To accomplish this, we must learn to express our ideas verbally as well as on paper. Your participation in classroom discussions, therefore, is extremely important. That is why a significant part of your grade for the course will be based upon the quality of your contributions to these deliberations.

**Absences**

Attendance in class is required. Only two absences may be excused during the course. If you must miss an additional class meeting, submit a written explanation either before or within one week following the class that was missed. An absence with an acceptable, documented, written explanation (a death, illness, or court appearance, for example) may be excused. Each additional absence without a written explanation – beyond the two allowed – will result in points lost during the final grade computation.

**Partial Absences**

Late arrivals and early departures without written explanation will incur a loss of grade points. If you arrive for class after the scheduled start time, please enter and take a seat as quietly as possible to avoid distracting other students and the instructor. If you find that you must leave during a class for any reason other than a personal hygiene emergency, please do not re-enter the classroom until the class has been dismissed.

**No Electronics**

Phones, iPads, and other personal electronic devices used to maintain contact with the outside world must be kept silent and out of sight during class. Students wishing to use laptop computers for taking notes should meet with the instructor to arrange permission. If you do have permission to take notes using a lighted computer screen, please turn it off during film showings.

**Academic Integrity and Student Conduct**

All writing projects and exam papers must be your original work and yours alone. Original work includes your words and ideas as the author of your submissions as well as the properly quoted or cited words and ideas of others. Any case of work copied from a source without proper documentation constitutes plagiarism, which will result in a failing grade and can lead to expulsion from the university. Expectations for academic integrity and student conduct are described on the website of the Office of Student Judicial and Ethical Affairs (<http://saweb.memphis.edu/judicialaffairs>), particularly in the sections entitled “Academic Dishonesty,” “Student Code of Conduct and Responsibilities,” and “Disruptive Behaviors.” The instructor for this course will expect students to be aware of these guidelines and to conduct themselves accordingly.

**Special Needs**

Any student who anticipates physical or academic barriers based on the impact of a disability is encouraged to speak about these issues privately with the instructor. Students with disabilities should also contact Disability Resources for Students (DRS) at 110 Wilder Tower, 901-678-2880. DRS coordinates access and accommodations for students with disabilities.

**Private Meetings**

Students are encouraged to arrange periodic private consultations with the instructor in his office. Time will be found to discuss further ideas raised in class, problems you may have in the class, or reasonable suggestions you may have for improving the course.

**Communication**

The best way to arrange meetings with me or communicate on other matters outside the classroom and office is by email (insert email here). Your instructor does not text, tweet, or Facebook – only email. You may leave a voicemail message at my office number, (901) 678-2565, but that is less reliable than email. For your own email address, please use the one assigned to you by the university. That makes things so much easier at my end.

**Class Schedule of 16 Weeks**

The content outlined in the schedule that follows will be updated periodically and new copies will be emailed to you. On some dates we will not meet as a class but will instead meet in smaller groups or one-on-one. Deadlines also may change, and I will strive to give you at least two week’s notice of any adjustments in the deadlines.

Week 1, Defining Documentary — Read Chapter 1: Introduction

Tues – August 25 – Definitions – Screening: *Evil Wins*

Thur – August 27 – Finding the Story – Screening: *The Nurse*

Week 2, Story Basics — Read Chapter 2: Story Basics

Tues – September 1 – Evaluating the Idea

Thur – September 3 – Describing the Idea

Screening: *Yosemite Summer*

Week 3, Researching and Observing — Read Chapter 3: Finding the Story

Tues – September 8 **Deadline for Submitting Step 1: The Idea**

Thur – September 10 – Focusing the Idea

Week 4, Pitching and Proposing — Read Chapter 4: Story Structure

Tues – September 15 – Researching the Idea

Thur – September 17 **Deadline for Submitting Step 2: Research Plan**

Screening: *The Chemo Ate My Homework*

Week 5, Planning and Casting — Read Chapter 5: Time on Screen

Tues – September 22 – Casting & Interviewing

Thur – September 24 – Writing the Proposal

Week 6, Writing Outlines and Lists — Read Chapter 6: Creative Approach

Tues – September 29 **–** Small Group Meetings

Thur – October 1 – Small Group Meetings

Week 7, Rewriting the Proposal — Read Chapter 7: Case Studies

Tues – October 6 **Deadline for Submitting Step 3: Documentary Proposal**

Screening: *Guns*

Thur – October 8 NO CLASS MEETING – Instructor Away

FALL BREAK

Week 8, Interviewing the Characters — Read Chapter 8: Research

Thur – October 15 – Discussion of Step 4

Discussion of Case Study/Term Paper Assignment

Week 9, Structuring the Story — Read Chapter 9: Planning

Tues – October 20 **Deadline for Step 4: List of Elements to be Filmed**

Screening: *Super Size Me*, First Half

Thur – October 22 – Structuring the Documentary

Screening: *Super Size Me*, Second Half

Week 10, Writing Narration — Read Chapter 10: Selling

Tues – October 27 – Small Group Meetings

Thur – October 29 – Small Group Meetings

**Deadline for Term Paper (Group One)**

Week 11, Writing the Final Draft — Read Chapter 11: Shooting

Tues – November 3 – Case Study Presentations

Thur – November 5 – Case Study Presentations

**Deadline for Term Paper (Group Two)**

Week 12, Re-Writing the Final Draft — Read Chapter 12: Editing

Tues – November 10 – Case Study Presentations

Thur – November 12 – Case Study Presentations

Week 13, Writing As An Editor — Read Chapter 13: Narration and Voice-Over

Tues – November 17 – Screening Excerpts: *Leaves* and *Daniel Johnston*

**Deadline for Submitting First Draft of Story Outline**

Thur – November 19 – Screening Excerpt: *The Thin Blue Line*

Week 14, Other Forms of Documentary — Read Chapter 14: Storytelling: A Checklist

Tues – November 24– Screening Excerpt: *March of the Penguins*

**Deadline for Submitting Step 5: Final Story Outline**

Thur – November 26 NO CLASS MEETING – Thanksgiving Holiday

Week 15, Review — Read textbook Part III: Talking about Story

Tues – December 1 – Discussing Outlines & the Next Step

Thur – December 3 – STUDY DAY

Week 16

Thur – December 10 FINAL EXAM 8:00 – 10:00 AM