

## A LEVEL

*Delivery Guide*

# ***FILM STUDIES***

**H410**

For first teaching in 2017

## **Component 2 – Section B: Documentary**

Version 1

# A LEVEL FILM STUDIES

This guide outlines approaches and ideas, including learner activities for the Section B of Component 2: Documentary.

Delivery guides are designed to represent a body of knowledge about teaching a particular topic and contain:

- **Content:** A clear outline of the content covered by the delivery guide;
- **Thinking Conceptually:** Expert guidance on the key concepts involved, common difficulties students may have, approaches to teaching that can help students understand these concepts and how this topic links conceptually to other areas of the subject;
- **Thinking Contextually:** A range of suggested teaching activities using a variety of themes so that different activities can be selected which best suit particular classes, learning styles or teaching approaches.

If you have any feedback on this Delivery Guide or suggestions for other resources you would like OCR to develop, please email [resources.feedback@ocr.org.uk](mailto:resources.feedback@ocr.org.uk)

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This resource was designed using the most up to date information from the specification at the time it was published. Specifications are updated over time, which means there may be contradictions between the resource and the specification, therefore please use the information on the latest specification at all times. If you do notice a discrepancy please contact us on the following email address: [resources.feedback@ocr.org.uk](mailto:resources.feedback@ocr.org.uk)

# A brief contextual history of documentary film

The Documentary component is designed to engage learners in the close study of documentary film. Learners are required to study documentary film and the ways in which this form of filmmaking uses film form, narrative and generic conventions to represent reality and create representations of societies and cultures. Learners also need to critically debate the claims of naturalism and realism and the formalist and structuralist conception of film narrative in relation to documentary film.

In order to evaluate how documentary film constructs meaning, learners will also need to analyse how the social, cultural, political, historical and institutional contexts inform a wider understanding of this mode of filmmaking.

Learners will build upon their understanding of Component 01, with particular reference to the micro-elements of film form and the construction of meaning and response by both filmmaker and spectator.

Learners must study one set documentary film in depth and there is a choice of six set documentary films. These films cover a range of different stylistic and aesthetic approaches and draw from the different modes of documentary.

Finally learners are required to study the significance of the following two, contrasting filmmakers' theories of film in relation to the set documentary film they study:

- John Grierson
- D.A. Pennebaker.

As a summary assessment of this section and questions will focus on:

- Representations (how they are constructed through film form, narrative and the generic conventions of documentary filmmaking)
- Contexts
- Spectatorship.

Critical debates on:

- Representations of reality and claims of naturalism and realism
- Film narrative
- Filmmakers' theories of film.

# Approaches to teaching the content

## General approaches

As with fiction film, documentary films will use a set of established techniques which allow the spectator to make sense of what they are watching. Unlike fiction film, where the classification is through genre, it is beneficial for the spectator to consider the 'mode' of documentary instead; this is due to the wide ranging subject areas covered by documentary films as well as the approach the filmmaker has taken being more useful to the spectator in understanding the film.

The mode of documentary will motivate the 'story' and the way the narrative is constructed. The mode will also dictate how obvious the narrative is and how active the spectator will need to be in making sense of it. For example a documentary which uses the poetic mode will place less emphasis on narrative structure and continuity editing will be less important; this would contrast with a film using the expository mode where the narrative structure will be very clear and the spectator will be on a much more fixed route through the film. Less will be left for the spectator to make up their own mind about.

We can also use indicate the way in which, through the choice of mode and editing, spectators are encouraged to adopt the position and outlook of the filmmaker and will potentially align themselves with the point of view being expressed within the documentary. Arguably this adoption of a point of view by the spectator is more explicit in documentary due to its very specific focus on 'actuality'.

## Contextual history of documentary filmmaking

As with fictional film a loose history of development can be identified within western documentary filmmaking. This is aligned to technological developments and the impact that they had on the production of documentary films.

The pre-documentary phase begins in 1895 with *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (Arrival of the train at Ciotat Station). This was a simple static camera filming a 'real' event.

The next step forward was in 1922 with *Nanook of the North* (Flaherty) which can be considered the first classic silent documentary. As with fiction films synchronous sound began to appear in documentary films during the 1930s, *Housing Problems* can be considered as a key example of this. The advent of synchronous sound presented technical problems to documentary films as the cost and the size of the equipment both caused difficulties. During this period sound was often voice over narration, music and sound effects. This partly accounts for the often omniscient narration in documentaries from this period.

As technology improved and both sound and camera kit got smaller and lighter it became possible to for a reduction in the number of people needed in a film crew. In the 1960s it was possible to use a small 16mm handheld synch camera to film on location and with minimal crew members. The filmmakers of the French New Wave had also taken advantage of the new lighter weight kit to make their films.

This technological shift allowed documentary filmmakers to produce more observational 'fly on the wall' work that later became known as 'Direct Cinema'. From the 1960s onwards filmmakers begun to mix styles to suit their needs and aesthetic. Contemporary documentaries have adopted a much more fluid approach to their construction, borrowing techniques and styles from a range of film genres and forms including large budget Hollywood productions to animations.

Given the contemporary nature of the set documentary films then rather than approach the classification of documentary film based on technology used it is possible to base it on content and mode of address.

## Modes of documentary filmmaking

In his book *'Introduction to Documentary'*<sup>1</sup> Bill Nichols proposes six different modes of documentary filmmaking. These are as follows:

### Poetic mode

Films made in this mode tend to focus more on the aesthetic elements and are interested in reflecting tone and mood as opposed to imposing a narrative structure on the content. Individual characters and their viewpoints and stories are not developed. The rhetorical element found in other modes of documentary remains underdeveloped. Films made in this mode can often be considered 'avant-garde' due to the structure and presentation of content.

### Expository mode

In contrast to the Poetic mode this mode is much more structured, often employing a 'voice of God' or authoritative narration to guide the spectator through the narrative structure and focus on a particular point of view. Unlike poetic mode, images in this mode of documentary serve to support and illustrate the narration; the narration is to help the spectator make sense of what they are seeing and why.

<sup>1</sup> Nicols, B. (2001) *Introduction to Documentary*. Indiana University Press. ISBN: 978-0253214690

**Observational mode**

The primary aspect of this mode of documentary is that the filmmaker is observing what is happening in front of the camera without any intervention. Unlike the poetic and the expository there is often no music, no scene arrangement, no interviews and no narration. As spectators we are meant to witness what the filmmaker is seeing and at the same time have greater agency in determining what is significant in the film or not. It can be considered to be a 'fly on the wall' approach to making documentaries.

**Participatory mode**

In this mode the visibility of the relationship between the filmmaker and the subject is present and not hidden. This can range from hearing the filmmaker asking questions to appearing on screen with the subjects. This mode should allow us as spectators to gain a sense of what it is like for the filmmaker to be in a particular situation.

**Reflexive mode**

This mode allows the filmmaker to engage with the spectator and draws attention to the construction of the documentary itself. This mode is the most self-aware and also the most self-questioning of the documentary modes and will force the spectator to question their relation to what is being presented on screen and the manner in which it is being done.

**Performative mode**

Unlike the participatory mode the performative mode is less about the filmmaker being involved with the subject as it is about the subject making the film. Nichols identifies it as 'we speak about ourselves to you' or even 'we speak about ourselves to us'; essentially this is about more than just documenting facts and events but as much about adding subjective qualities surrounding the filmmaker or subjects' own experiences.

These modes provide a useful starting point for thinking about documentary film and classifying it in a more structured way than just genre terms. It presents a critical framework for considering how a film can be 'read' by a spectator rather than trying to place it into a historical continuum.

The six documentary set films for this component are:

*The Stories We Tell* (2013). Directed by Sarah Polley, 12

*Searching for Sugarman* (2012). Directed by Malik Bendjelloul, 12

*5 Broken Cameras* (2011). Directed by Emad Burnat, Guy Davidi. 15

*The Act of Killing* (2012). Directed by Joshua Oppenheimer, 15

*Man on Wire* (2008). Directed by James Marsh, 12

*Citizenfour* (2014). Directed by Laura Poitras, 15

**Documentary as text**

Whilst documentary film does not fit easily into the same genre categories used by fiction film, it does rely heavily on the language and grammar used in fictional filmmaking; there is no alternative film language specifically for documentary. This adoption of fictional film grammar has resulted in 'mainstream' conventions being applied to documentary film and have allowed spectators to 'read' documentary films and make sense of them. Techniques such as cross-cutting, sound effects, voiceover, music and stylised reconstructions are all used in documentary films. At face value the use of cinematic techniques can appear at odds with a film which is dealing with real events and real people. Arguably though, it fits with Grierson's definition of documentary as 'the creative treatment of actuality'. The 'actuality' of documentary has always been subject to 'creative treatment' through the need to construct a narrative, through manipulation during editing, for example or in early documentaries, the need for scenes to be reshot so that the synch sound would work. Reconstructions have always been part of the 'creative treatment' from *Nanook of the North* onwards and whilst this technique was avoided in Direct Cinema there was still a need for films made in this style to create narrative coherence.

The micro-elements of film form therefore can be seen to underpin documentary film as well. Cinematography, mise-en-scène, editing, sound and performance are used by documentary filmmakers to help shape and direct both narrative structure and representations in their films. In the documentary films chosen for close study it is possible to see how these techniques can be used. *Man on Wire* (Marsh 2008) focuses on the story of Philippe Petit and his wire walk between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in 1974. In telling this 'story' it blends archive footage, still photographs and talking head interviews alongside reconstructions which themselves resemble sequences from a thriller film. Throughout the film a non-diegetic soundtrack is also used to enhance spectator response and generate meaning.

The use of reconstructions is also evident in *The Act of Killing* (Oppenheimer 2012) which focuses on a number of individuals who participated in mass killings in Indonesia in 1965-66. The reconstructions borrow from fictional genres to reconstruct memories; Oppenheimer refers to the film as a 'documentary of the imagination' which signifies a shift away from both the Grierson and Direct Cinema approach. This also allows for a more creative approach to the way in which a documentary can tell a story or deal with the idea of 'truth'.

Whilst very different in terms of content and tone *The Stories We Tell* (Polley 2013) also plays with the idea of memory and its unreliable nature. The film mixes interviews with family and friends, narration from her 'father', archive footage and reconstructions shot on Super 8 which are made to look like archive family film. This use of a variety of techniques is vital to how the filmmaker wishes to construct the narrative and how to represent her family, both collectively and individually.

*5 Broken Cameras* (Burnat and David 2011) is also a personal story which uses observational footage shot by Emad Burnat with added narration to help guide the spectator. The film uses a diary style narrative structure with each section linked to one of the five broken cameras. The use of this diary structure device helps to shape the narrative, as the film becomes a journey from the personal to the political. *Searching for Sugarman* (Bendjelloul 2012) also uses a journey structure to shape its narrative, following two fans as they search for Sixto Rodriguez. Mixing archive footage and talking head interviews with other footage shot on Super 8 the filmmaker has made an aesthetic decision in how the overall film will look and how micro-elements such as sound will be used to enhance the emotion within the story. In dealing with a more serious and overtly political topic *Citizenfour* (Portias 2014) use a mix of interviews, narration and screen based communications to tell the story of both Edward Snowden and the NSA surveillance program. The use of tightly framed shots help to signify Edward Snowden as a trapped political agent, this is supported by a non-diegetic soundtrack which helps to create tension and enhance the atmosphere for the spectator.

Arguably the most important micro-element in constructing the documentary's story and narrative is editing. How the filmmaker chooses to show the spectator information and the order in which this is presented is key. This is where the story will start to make sense and where pacing and story structure become vital in communicating the films messages and values. It is important to be aware that no documentary will be completely neutral; even one which is primarily observational such as *5 Broken Cameras* ultimately becomes more political and polemical.

### Documentary and wider meaning

All filmmaking is influenced by a range of wider factors including social, cultural, political, historical and institutional contexts in which the film is produced, distributed and viewed. Documentary film is perhaps more explicit in reflecting some of these contexts and all of the set films do this to varying extents. All of the films apart from *Citizenfour* reflect on events which are historical at the time of production: *Man on Wire* examines and documents an event which took place in 1974; *The Act of Killing* covers events which occurred in 1965-66; *Searching for Sugarman* deals with a recording artist who prior to the film last released an album in 1971 and *The Stories We Tell* deals with an individual's past. This reflection on the past and framing the story around historical events can allow documentary to comment on contemporary issues and reframe past events within a current social, cultural and political context. *Man on Wire* was released in 2008, seven years after 9/11 but this event is never mentioned in the film even in contemporary interviews with the key protagonists, and arguably this deliberate omission makes the film more poignant as it reflects on a time and place which no longer exist. Equally, *Searching for Sugarman* covers a period of major political and social change within South Africa and uses the narrative device of searching for a singer to cover a wider range of issues. *The Act of Killing* deals with historical political issues but in a contemporary context forcing the spectator to reflect on these issues now. It is a good example of how a film can

potentially be an agent for facilitating social, cultural and political developments through the representation and re-construction of historical issues and events. This can also be applied to *5 Broken Cameras* which deals with political issues within in Palestine and Israel but does so primarily through the experiences of one man and his family.

A family based focus is also central to *The Stories We Tell* which is an example of how a film can act as a means of constructing social and cultural attitudes toward wider issues and beliefs due to the topics and experiences which are explored within the films narrative, characterisation and representations. In contrast to this *Citizenfour* deals with much more contemporary issues and can be seen as a film which reflects and comments on current social, cultural and political attitudes all of which are explored within the films narrative and representations, both of individuals and institutions.

Given the smaller audiences which documentary films attract all of the set films reflect production, financial and technological opportunities and constraints. This varies between films and on both the aesthetic and technical choices that have been made during production; from shooting on Super 8 to the need to travel with minimal equipment.

As filmmakers, John Grierson and D.A. Pennebaker can be seen to represent two very different schools of thought within documentary filmmaking and they also have an accessible body of work and writings and interviews about documentary filmmaking. Unlike an academic writing about film, their writing and interviews often reflect upon their own practice and position rather than offer a specific theory.

Grierson can be arguably be seen as the founding member of the Documentary Film Movement, a movement which should use cinematic means to draw attention to the role of individuals within society and promote a set of values including the heroism of ordinary people, the mixing of social classes and the individual's role as part of a wider collective. The first film produced by Grierson which built on these values was *Drifters* (1929), which proved to be a critical, and a commercial success - it was produced by the EMB (Empire Marketing Board) and is on the surface a short film about the herring industry. From this the key period for the production of documentary films that aligned themselves with Grierson's ideas about what a documentary should be was from 1930-1952 during which time a significant number of socially focused documentaries were produced. Grierson was instrumental in developing the idea about what type of documentary should be produced and its wider role in society but he was not the only filmmaker to be part of the wider movement. Other key figures include Humphrey Jennings, Basil Wright and Alberto Cavalcanti all of whom made significant films during this period.

In contrast to Grierson, D.A. Pennebaker began his career in the 1960s and at a time when filmmaking technology had improved, was much lighter and now fully portable. Alongside this there was a reaction to the way documentary films had previously been

made and the lack of authenticity which resulted in a movement known as Direct Cinema. Pennebaker was a member of 'Drew Associates' and involved in *Primary* (1960) which followed a young John Kennedy as he ran for election. From this he began to make films which he felt fitted better with his view about what Direct Cinema should be. This was perhaps realised with *Don't Look Back* (1965), his film which followed Bob Dylan on his final acoustic tour of Britain. It is feature length and voiceover free and offers a marked change from what a documentary could be and what it could look like. The lasting influence of Direct Cinema on documentary is perhaps its aesthetic which is evident in the use of handheld camera moves and a 'gritty' and 'real' look.

### Common misconceptions or difficulties learners may have

It is important for learners to be clear about what a documentary film is and the differences between this and fiction films based on real events. There is often confusion with biopics and other films based on true stories.

It is also important that learners are aware that the films studied were released cinematically and that there is a difference between a documentary on TV and one released in a cinema even if it subsequently gets a TV screening.

With this topic there is likely to be some concern over the role of filmmakers as theorists. Rather than search for a set theory, it is more of a summary of the filmmaker's view of how a documentary can be made and their approach to making a documentary. This represents a subtle shift away from theory being more academically based.

### Conceptual links to other areas of the specification – useful ways to approach this topic to set learners up for topics later in the course

The study of documentary film draws upon and develops learning from the whole course and will include but not be limited to: an understanding of the micro-elements of film form (Cinematography, mise-en-scène, editing, sound performance); how narrative and generic conventions of documentary film contribute to the ways in which documentary film represents reality and creates representations of societies and cultures; the claims of naturalism and realism and the formalist and structuralist conception of film narrative in relation to documentary film.

Learners will also study the contextual framework of the documentary film with a consideration of how the social, cultural, political, historical and institutional contexts inform analysis and understanding of this mode of filmmaking.



**Approaches to teaching the content**

This delivery guide provides a range of learning opportunities that encourage a variety of approaches to the study of documentary film and can be applied to any of the six set films. These range from practising textual analysis of how documentary films construct and represent reality, to considering the viewpoints of the theorists (Grierson and Pennebaker) in relation to the set texts, to creative exercises that allow learners to explore how to present a particular viewpoint.





**Learner Activity 1****Filmmaker as theorist**

Learners should have knowledge of John Grierson and D.A. Pennebaker and their views on documentary filmmaking. To introduce learners to this ask them to complete a fact file. This can be referred to as the topic is explored further and linked directly to the film studied. Below are links for each filmmaker to get you started.

This is by no means exhaustive and where possible it would be useful to supplement this with relevant books, suggestions are listed below as well. You could ask learners to research one aspect and present it to the rest of the class. You could also have the class debate the differing views and see which viewpoint is most relevant to the film that they have studied.

**John Grierson (links)**

- <http://www.griersontrust.org/about-us/john-grierson.html> - Grierson Trust website (<http://www.griersontrust.org/assets/files/articles/john-grierson-n-pronay.pdf>)
- <http://libguides.stir.ac.uk/archives/Grierson> - Archive of Grierson's work at the University of Stirling
- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b012p53d> - BBC 4 Documentary Britain Through a Lens: The Documentary Film Mob available online (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v6fWe0tpSSg>)
- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b042rlbv> - BBC 2 Documentary Documenting John Grierson available online (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQir-RxlZ0>)
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Grierson](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Grierson) - Wikipedia page

**D.A. Pennebaker (links)**

- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/D.\\_A.\\_Pennebaker](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/D._A._Pennebaker) - Wikipedia page
- <http://www.bfi.org.uk/explore-film-tv/sight-sound-magazine/video/freewheelin-music-documentary-da-pennebaker-looks-back> - interview with Sight and Sound magazine
- <http://povmagazine.com/articles/view/the-pov-interview-d-a-pennebaker-and-chris-hegedus-unlocking-the-cage> - interview with POV magazine
- <http://www.indiewire.com/2016/05/d-a-pennebaker-why-the-90-year-old-documentarian-is-still-driven-to-find-the-truth-in-people-510386/> - good article on Pennebaker from Indiewire online magazine
- <http://phfilms.com/history/> - D.A. Pennebaker's production company
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wii6fDmv50E> - Interview with D.A. Pennebaker
- <https://vimeo.com/21664518> - Greil Marcus interviews D.A. Pennebaker about filming Bob Dylan

**Books**

- 'On Documentary' John Grierson (Faber and Faber 1979) ISBN: 0571113672 (<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Documentary-John-Grierson/dp/0571113672>)
- D. A. Pennebaker: *Interviews (Conversations with Filmmakers Series)* (University Press of Mississippi 2015) ISBN: 1628462027 (<https://www.amazon.co.uk/D-Pennebaker-Interviews-Conversations-Filmmakers-ebook/dp/B01C90QYE4>)
- *Imagining Reality: The Faber Book of Documentary* Edited by Mark Cousins and Kevin Macdonald (Faber and Faber 2006) ISBN: 0571225144 (<https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/B0056HIOFU/ref=dp-kindle-redirect?encoding=UTF8&btcr=1>)
- *The Documentary Film Book* Edited by Brian Winston (British Film Institute 2013) ISBN: 1844573419 (<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Documentary-Film-Book-Brian-Winston/dp/1844573419>)



John Grierson (right) examining wartime documentary posters

## Viewing activities

Watch the chosen film through. Learners should make notes as they watch the film – these can be used during the following tasks. Personal response is important. Learners should understand that their personal interpretation is valid and will feed into their comments on wider issues.

### Learner Activity 2

#### Identifying and understanding structural elements of film

These tasks will enable learners to identify how structural elements are used to generate spectator response and how documentary film uses elements from fiction film.

- Using the following information help introduce learners to the different modes of documentary filmmaking:  
<http://nofilmschool.com/2015/09/nichols-6-modes-documentary-can-help-expand-your-storytelling>  
<https://www.videomaker.com/article/c06/18423-six-primary-styles-of-documentary-production>
- With the help of a copy of the synopsis, ask learners to identify which mode or modes of documentary they think the focus film fits. Learners should identify specific sequences that they think illustrate this.
- Having watched the film learners should investigate how the film's narrative is structured. Could the film's narrative fit into a model for fiction films? Does it use a similar three act structure? The following articles help explain what this is and how it works.  
<https://5writers.com/2013/04/03/screenwriting-structure-the-three-act-paradigm/>  
<https://filmandphilosophy.com/2015/02/11/film-narrative/>  
<http://hacktext.com/2011/09/story-vs-narrative-vs-plot-1205/>  
 Learners should use the following worksheet to try and map out the film and to see if it uses a conventional narrative structure <http://sydfield.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/paradigm.pdf>  
 If not in what ways is it different? Could you restructure the film so that it followed a conventional narrative structure?
- Identify the key characters from the films. Identify the function of the characters in the film. Consider how the audience is guided to respond to the characters. How are they shot? How are they positioned within the narrative? How are they represented? How do you respond to them?

### Learner Activity 3

#### Analysing key scenes

Identify how the micro-elements of film form are used to construct the structural elements of documentary film. This will mean close textual analysis of specific sequences and considering how they link to wider elements of the film.

Possible questions to consider:

- How are you positioned as a spectator?
- Can the documentary be trusted? How reliable is the narration? Does it reflect the actual events? How has the film been edited?
- What techniques have been used to tell the story? Have reconstructions been used? Have talking head interviews been used? What impact do these have on the spectator?
- How is sound used? Is non-diegetic sound used, if so how?
- How are characters framed? How is cinematography used to tell the story?

### Learner Activity 4

#### Beyond the text

Ask learners to investigate the social, economic, political, historical and institutional context for the focus film. If so in what ways does it do this? You could use collaborative tools such as Google drive, or Microsoft Onedrive to produce a whole class learner resource. It would be useful for learners to identify specific scenes which they think illustrate their points.

Possible questions to consider:

- What impact has social, economic or political factors had on the film's production?
- Does the film represent a particular political viewpoint? If so what is this and how is it evident?
- Does the film construct a particular viewpoint based upon the institutional context?
- How have these factors impacted upon how the film has been received critically and commercially?

**Learner Activity 5****Practical activity: Documentary filmmaking**

Learners should attempt to make a micro documentary which uses one of the modes of documentary. Ideally they should be able to limit this to about 60 seconds. They should think about a topic that they could easily cover. Some links below illustrate what can be done and ways to structure it:

<http://kino-eye.com/2014/11/17/structuring-micro-docs/>

<http://www.desktop-documentaries.com/mini-documentary.html>

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCYsWPPZMhfI9EddYpPe6CYw>

**Learner Activity 6****Summary activity**

Ask learners to consider the key debates surrounding documentary. How have their views been guided by the filmmaker? How do narrative and character help to guide their response? How does the institutional, social, political context affect their response? How does their chosen film fit with or work against the views of Grierson and Pennebaker?





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