

**College of San Mateo  
Official Course Outline**

1. **COURSE ID:** FILM 123    **TITLE:** Documentary Film: Studies and Practice  
**Units:** 4.0 units    **Hours/Semester:** 64.0-72.0 Lecture hours; and 128.0-144.0 Homework hours  
**Method of Grading:** Grade Option (Letter Grade or Pass/No Pass)
  
2. **COURSE DESIGNATION:**  
**Degree Credit**  
**Transfer credit:** CSU  
**AA/AS Degree Requirements:**  
    CSM - GENERAL EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS: E5c. Humanities
  
3. **COURSE DESCRIPTIONS:**  
**Catalog Description:**  
    Introduces students to the study and practice of documentary film. Critical survey of key historical and contemporary documentary films; and practical application of documentary concepts through group and individual film production exercises, using primarily consumer electronic devices, though including access to higher grade film department equipment.
  
4. **STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOME(S) (SLO'S):**  
    Upon successful completion of this course, a student will meet the following outcomes:
  1. express the basic aesthetic concepts of documentary film
  2. explain key aspects of historically significant documentary films
  3. write a critical genre review of a documentary film; or produce a short amateur example of a genre of documentary film
  
5. **SPECIFIC INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES:**  
    Upon successful completion of this course, a student will be able to:
  1. Distinguish documentary from other types of filmmaking.
  2. Articulate the complex ethical issues around representing subjects and topics.
  3. Explain the relationship between documentary and historical, cultural, economic and technological context.
  4. Identify the storytelling techniques used in documentary film.
  
6. **COURSE CONTENT:**  
**Lecture Content:**  
**Course content:** This course will survey the documentary film genre and facilitate clear, effective writing strategies for both non-fiction film analysis and production. It will combine an examination of contemporary documentary filmmaking practices in the US and abroad with a critical look at the development of documentary from the turn of the 20th Century to the present. Writing exercises and assignments will expose students to a spectrum of writing “voices”, including formal and cultural critiques, as well as treatments and grant proposals.  
We tend to think of documentary film as a genre that stakes its identity in a privileged relation to reality—a concern with life “as it is.” And yet, turning to the history of non-fiction film, we encounter a remarkable array of approaches to reality, not all of which claim to capture it “as it is.” In this course, we will trace the shifting claims of documentary film in relation to the problematic category of the real. In the first part of the course, we will trace the evolution of the non-fiction film in its various forms, including spectacle, ethnography, and propaganda. We will then turn to the question of realism, asking how it appears as an aesthetic of both nonfiction and fiction films alike. In the final part of the course, we will ask how the documentary claim to reality has been contested and reformulated over the past several decades, producing both new understandings of the “real” and hybrid cinematic forms.

**Sample Course Schedule**

<b>Week One</b>	<b>Course Introduction</b>
<b>Week Two</b>	<b>How Do We Define Documentary films</b>
Reading:	Nichols 1-41, 253-271
Off-site Screening:	<i>F for Fake</i> (1973, Welles)
<b>Week Three</b>	<b>Why Are Ethical Issues Central to Documentary Filmmaking?</b>

Reading:	Nichols 42-66
Off-site Screening:	<i>Grey Gardens</i> (1975, Maysles/Hovde)
<b>Week Four</b>	<b>What gives Documentaries a voice of their own</b>
Reading:	Nichols 68-93
Off-site Screening:	<i>Man with a Movie Camera</i> (1929, Vertov)
	<i>The Gleaners &amp; I</i> (2000, Varda)
<b>Week Five</b>	<b>What Makes Documentaries Engaging and Persuasive</b>
Reading:	Nichols 94-119
Off-site Screening:	<i>Harlan County USA</i> (1976, Kopple)
<b>Week Six</b>	<b>Documentary Mode</b>
Reading:	Nichols 142-211
Off-site Screening:	<i>Assorted short documentaries</i>
<b>Week Seven</b>	<b>How have documentaries addressed social and political issues?</b>
	<i>March 10</i>
Reading:	Nichols 212-252
Off-site Screening:	<i>How to Survive a Plague</i> (2012, France)
	<i>Silverlake Life: The View from Here</i> (1993, Friedlin/Joslin)
<b>Week Eight</b>	<b>Documentary Voice Case Study</b>
Reading:	<i>PDFs distributed in class and/or via iLearn</i>
On-site Screening:	<i>The Look of Silence</i> (2014, Oppenheimer)
Off-site Screening:	<i>The Act of Killing</i> (2012, Oppenheimer)
Due	Documentary Analysis paper
<b>Week Nine</b>	<b>Writing for non-fiction films</b>
<b>Week Ten</b>	<b>Writing Voiceover</b>
On-site screening:	<i>Night &amp; Fog</i> (1955, Resnais)
Off-site Screening:	<i>Grizzly Man</i> (2005, Herzog)
<b>Week Eleven</b>	<b>Interviews: Writing Questions</b>
Off-site Screening:	<i>The Thin Blue Line</i> (1988, Morris)
Assignment Due:	Documentary Project synopsis
<b>Week Twelve</b>	<b>Interviews: Assembling Responses</b>
Assignment Due:	Documentary Treatment
<b>Week Thirteen</b>	<b>Class visit</b>
Assignment Due:	Interview questions
<b>Week Fourteen</b>	<b>Workshop Interview responses</b>
Assignment due:	Interview transcriptions
<b>Week Fifteen</b>	<b>Final Project Presentations and Review</b>
Assignment Due:	Interview Project
<b>Week 16: The Essay-film</b>	
Tues.—Memory/History	
Screening: Night and Fog (Alain Resnais, 1955)	
Thurs. —Autobiography	
Screening: Sherman’s March (1986)	
*Readings: Michael Renov, “History and/as Autobiography: The Essayistic in Film & Video”	
<b>Week 17: Documentary and the Avant-Garde</b>	
Tues.—Screening: Tongues Untied (Riggs, 1990)	
*Reading: Sheila Petty, "Silence and Its Opposite: Expressions of Race in Tongues Untied"	
Thurs.— Screening: South (Ackerman, 1999)	
*Reading: Interview with Chantal Ackerman	

**Lab Content:**

None

**TBA Hours Content:**

None.

**7. REPRESENTATIVE METHODS OF INSTRUCTION:**

Typical methods of instruction may include:

- A. Lecture
- B. Activity
- C. Discussion
- D. Guest Speakers

## 8. REPRESENTATIVE ASSIGNMENTS

Representative assignments in this course may include, but are not limited to the following:

### Writing Assignments:

1. Students will write a 6-8 page critical analysis of the filmmaking technique of a single non-fiction film. This assignment calls on students to describe and evaluate a sequence from a specific documentary film, utilizing relevant theoretical vocabulary and concepts. An aesthetic and contextual analysis, the paper should contain at least three sources in class readings.

2. Students will conduct a 20-40 minute interview with a documentary subject of their choice and will then transcribe the interview and re-arrange the subject responses into a 5 minute documentary "paper edit". Students will provide new project materials on a weekly basis: a synopsis and logline, a treatment, interview questions, interview transcriptions, a paper edit, and the interview media (audio or video - unedited).

3. Presentation of Documentary Filmmaker:

Students will research a documentary filmmaker who exemplifies a particular documentary approach and aesthetic. Students will submit a critical biographical written essay (5 pages), and an oral presentation to the class. Both will highlight the aesthetic and political challenges faced by the filmmaker, as well as significant contributions to the art and practice of documentary film.

4. Final Project: Drawing upon the conceptual and technical skills developed in the course, students will work in pairs of two and write, shoot, direct, and edit a video documentary; the video documentary will be accompanied by a written, researched justification, as well as an oral critique of some "problem" or aesthetic/thematic issue that is addressed by the video.

### Reading Assignments:

Students throughout the term will be assigned reading assignments from textbooks and outside sources. Such readings cover the history and theory of documentary film, including celluloid, video and digital formats. Readings also cover particular filmmakers and genres of documentary, as well as important techniques and aesthetics.

Reading assignments will be reinforced with quizzes, in-class exercises, and journals on key concepts covered.

### Other Outside Assignments:

Audio Interview: Record an interview with a classmate and edit into a coherent, engaging exploration of an aspect of the interviewee's personal history, interest, or personality. Work in pairs, with each partner interviewing the other.

Video Recording of a Process: Using a handheld camera, film a process and edit it into a 2-3 minute video.

Profile a person or several people, and show the steps of the process, the difficulties, challenges, and the goals and personalities of those involved.

Drawing upon the conceptual and technical skills developed in the first two assignments, work in pairs of two and write, shoot, direct, and edit a video documentary.

## 9. REPRESENTATIVE METHODS OF EVALUATION

Representative methods of evaluation may include:

- A. Class Participation
- B. Class Performance
- C. Class Work
- D. Exams/Tests
- E. Group Projects
- F. Homework
- G. Oral Presentation
- H. Papers
- I. Portfolios
- J. Quizzes
- K. Research Projects

## 10. REPRESENTATIVE TEXT(S):

Possible textbooks include:

- A. Bernard, Curran Sheila. *Documentary Storytelling*, ed. Focal Press, 2016
- B. Anderson, Kelly. *Documentary Voice and Vision*, ed. Focal Press, 2016
- C. Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary Film*, 3rd ed. Indiana Univ Press, 2017

**Origination Date:** June 2017  
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**Course Originator:** David Laderman