



EXPLORE AND DISCOVER

ACTIVITY 1 Observe by Watching



2 hrs 30 min

GOAL To understand the purpose, target audience, and social functions of documentaries. To recognize how documentaries are organized.

In this activity, you will:

- 1 Identify the basic elements that characterize the structure of documentaries.
- 2 Become aware of the codes and conventions used in documentaries.
- 3 Examine the language used in documentaries, including the use of connotations.
- 4 Analyze videos to discuss the purpose, or social function, and the target audience.



CULTURAL TILE

You can observe a lot by watching.

Baseball player Yogi Berra became famous for his quotes that were sometimes hard to understand, sometimes apparent contradictions, and sometimes stating the obvious. Some of his quotes are well known such as, "It ain't over till it's over," meaning that the team stood a chance to win until the last player was out of the game, or "It gets late early out there," in reference to the sun getting in the eyes of players in the early evening. "You can observe a lot by watching" was used in reference to what you can learn by paying attention to how the best people in your profession do their job.

Task A: Heavy-Hitting Documentaries

On television, on the web, or at film festivals, documentaries, which are films that expose or observe events or situations, are everywhere. Documentaries present facts, sometimes trying to influence the viewers' ideas.

- 1 What is the most memorable documentary you have ever seen? Describe it briefly and explain why it had such an impact on you. If you have never seen a documentary, you can use the link below to describe the documentary and explain its impact.

See Answer Key

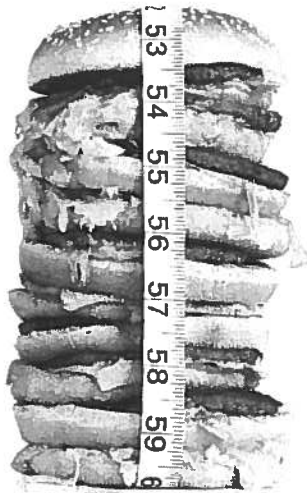




To see an example of an excellent documentary go to the media resource page and watch *Plastic Bottles*, a documentary directed and written by Jon Ornoy on the works of American photographer Chris Jordan.

A Range of Possibilities

Unlike earlier documentaries, today's documentaries contain language that is quite informal. Some documentaries clearly promote certain social values rather than remain completely focussed on reporting facts. American filmmaker Michael Moore is famous for promoting social and political values in his documentaries. In *Bowling for Columbine*, Moore promotes the view of those seeking tighter gun regulations. In the documentary, Moore confronts actor Charlton Heston, who was president of the U.S. National Rifle Association, about his support of guns and Heston's refusal to consider changes to the gun control laws.



Some documentaries follow a person or the development of an event over a period of time. For example, in *Supersize Me*, filmmaker Morgan Spurlock documents his own life as he spends a month eating three meals a day at McDonald's. Spurlock does not exercise during the month and he gains about 11 kilos. After the month he spent eating McDonald's food, Spurlock followed a "detox" diet—it took him 14 months to lose the extra weight. The film had an impact on many viewers. McDonald's, partially in response to the documentary, now offers healthy choices.

Other documentaries explore family secrets, such as Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell*, in which among other things, she looks at how she discovered who her biological father was.

Task B: Types of Documentaries

What types of documentaries can you come across as you research films that you could recommend to the library at the centre? Although many types exist, three common categories will be covered in this learning situation. Read the descriptions below. Later on, you will be asked to match them with the documentaries you will watch.



Michael Moore

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Did you know ?

Documentaries: films or movies?

"Movies" generally refers to commercial fiction, Hollywood-type entertainment. Although all movies are films, "film" is used for non-fiction such as documentaries, for short films, but also for artistic, or auteur productions that reflect a filmmaker's creative vision.

Expository

While most people understand what a documentary is, they probably think of **expository documentaries**. These documentaries often use a voice-over commentary by an authoritative voice used to guide the viewers in interpreting what they see. Expository documentaries primarily explain and inform. Some might try, by exposing a problem, to persuade the viewer about a point of view. Expository documentaries may make use of archives such as old photographs, films, or documents in order to present facts.

Observational

Observational documentaries let the camera do the work. Mobile cameras and sound equipment allow filmmakers to observe events or the lives of people as they unfold, letting the audience judge for itself. Although there may be narration and commentary to connect the dots, most of the ideas that the viewers should remember will come from observing what they have seen on the screen.

Reflexive

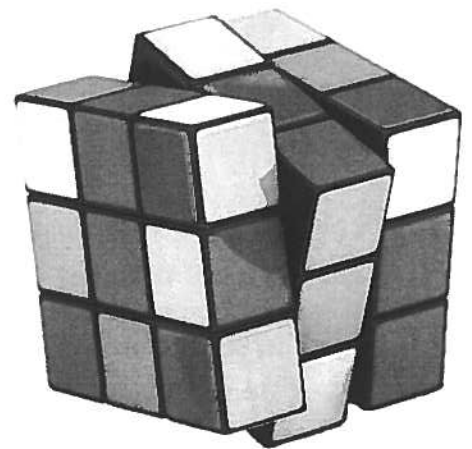
Reflexive documentaries show the filmmaker's reflections while often including the filmmaker as a character. The filmmaker may be using the film on a path to discovery, or even self-discovery. The film represents one view of the world and may try to show us aspects that we are not familiar with. The film itself may be trying to change the nature of the subject being filmed.



You will now watch a short documentary, *The Cuber*, produced and directed by filmmaker Chris Frampton in which he examines the life of Eric Limeback, an 18-year-old young man who is among the best in the country in his field of interest.

In order to watch this documentary, go to the media resource page or use the media provided by your teacher or tutor.

Take notes as you watch.



2 With the help of your notes, summarize the documentary.

Here are some questions that can guide you in your summary and analysis.

3 What kind of documentary is it, expository, observational, or reflexive? Justify your choice.

4 Is the film objective or does it show a bias?

5 What is the film's purpose? Is it to inform, to explain, to narrate, to open minds, to entertain, or to persuade? Keep in mind that the film may fulfil more than one purpose.

6 Who would be interested in seeing this documentary? Who is the target audience?

7 What did you like or did not like about this documentary?

8 Out of 100 viewers, how many people do you think would "Like" this film on social media? Explain your answer.

See Answer Key



Task C: Treasure Trove

Asking the right questions about a documentary means that you have to know what elements to look at. Most documentaries use similar ways to present information. The most common ones appear below.

Voice-over narration: Someone not seen on screen gives explanations or interpretations on what appears on screen.

Interviews: People are interviewed to discuss a topic or to give an opinion on the subject of the documentary.

Photographs: Still photographs are used, often to show older events.

Live scenes: The filmmaker gets videos of people interacting, of natural phenomena, of the life of animals, or of any event or situation that reports on the subject of the documentary.

Archive footage from old films: For many subjects where films from the past exist, excerpts from old films are used to illustrate past events.

Animation: When film is not available, or when the filmmaker does not want to reconstruct a scene, animated film is used to help the viewer visualize the topic of the documentary.

Speech: Unlike standard TV programs or movies, a wide variety of accents or local dialects are common. The levels of language will vary as well. Sometimes accents will force the filmmaker to use English subtitles for spoken English because the viewers' comprehension would be hindered without those subtitles.

Music: Musical passages ranging from soft intimate music to dynamic pounding music are often used to enhance the mood, to underscore symbolism, or to integrate with the visuals in order to contribute to the narrative or storytelling. Generally though, music merely provides a backdrop to visual elements.

Task D: Recognizing the Features of Documentaries

You have just read about types of documentaries and the elements found in them. Your job is now to see if you can recognize these elements as you watch a documentary. You will watch a film directed and produced by an independent filmmaker, Heather Slepchik, in which she explores the lives of red-haired people today and through history. Slepchick came across some research that suggested that redheads might eventually disappear from the human gene pool. She wants her film to be a legacy to redheads as she organizes a party and puts together a time capsule with contributions from other redheads.

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In order to watch *The Last of the Redheads* by Heather Slepchik, go to the media resource page or use the media provided by your teacher or tutor.

Take notes as you watch. You may have to watch the film several times in order to be able to answer the questions.



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With the help of your notes, summarize the documentary.

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What type of documentary is it: expository, observational, or reflexive? Use examples from the film to support your view.

11

Discuss the use of the following elements in *The Last of the Redheads*.

a) Voice-over narration: _____

- b) Interviews: _____

- c) Photographs: _____

- d) Live scenes: _____

- e) Archive footage from old films: _____

- f) Animation: _____

- g) Speech: _____

- h) Music: _____



The film examines some of the prejudice faced by redheads. Describe what kinds of prejudices are mentioned.

See Answer Key



Task E: Evaluating the Credibility and Purpose of a Documentary

Some questions that apply to print news also apply when considering the credibility of a documentary.

Credibility

13 Who produced the documentary?

14 Are the people quoted in the text credible? Explain your answer.

Purpose

15 What is the purpose of the documentary? The purpose is why the documentary is produced and what the filmmaker wants to accomplish, for example: to inform, to explain, to narrate, to open minds, to entertain, or to persuade.

Reliability of the Information

16 How reliable is the information? Can it be corroborated with unrelated independent sources? Comment on accuracy, on the level of details and support, and on whether the information can be proven wrong.

Bias

17 Some filmmakers have an agenda. Is the information fair or one-sided? If it is one-sided, is the information totally for or against someone or something?

Agenda

A view or a mission held by a person or group that is often not explicitly presented.

18 Examine the use of language in the documentary.

The following terms or expressions were used in the film.

- a) Based on the examples below, describe the language used. Is it neutral language or emotional language? Explain whether the language reflects any bias.
- *"This difference is something that I have really grown to love and also started to worry about."*
 - *"Something I took pride in."*
 - *"We only have 100 years left."*
 - *"Some people 'are repulsed'."*
 - *"If they hadn't done horrible things to redheads in the past, maybe there would be more of us today."*
 - *"During the Salem witch trials, [. . .] redheads were believed to be witches and descendants of the devil."*
 - *"In England, 'gingerism' is a term used to discriminate against redheads that is often crude and derogatory."*
 - *"We're sort of gonna be looked upon as unicorns or the dodo bird."*
 - *"When I read in the newspaper that there is a possibility of going extinct, I was very shocked."*
 - *"Maybe we'll stay, maybe we won't."*

b) Explain the connotation (what the term suggests or infers) of:

- Redhead _____
- Gingerism _____
- Dodo birds _____

Exploring Other Options

19 Evaluate the film's intellectual, emotional and aesthetic appeal. How good is it at using the viewers' intelligence and feelings? Will the viewers be impressed by some form of beauty in the film?

20

Would you recommend the acquisition of *The Last of the Redheads* by the centre's library? Support your answer with valid reasons. Here are sub-questions that can guide you.

- What significant message in this story can people relate to?
- Why is the subject matter important or interesting to library users?

See Answer Key



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ACTIVITY 2 Did You Get the Message?



3 hrs

GOAL To recognize the differences between objective and persuasive documentaries.

In this activity, you will:

- Demonstrate your comprehension of neutrality or of a lack of objectivity in a documentary.
- Examine the language used in the video to see how neutral it is.
- Discuss the credibility of the sources or experts quoted in the documentary.
- Analyze the impact of emotionally charged images.

Task A: Balancing Act

Among the questions that can help you evaluate documentaries is this question: Are documentaries limited to a fair and balanced presentation of facts?

Think of some documentaries you may have seen recently. Were they strictly factual?