

Civic Documentaries

Lesson Plan

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Civic Documentaries

Timing: 5–8 class periods

Grade Level: 6–12

Subject: Civics, Social Studies

Lesson description

Creating documentaries requires many higher-order thinking skills: students need to research and collect information, analyze and interpret that information, and edit the information into a coherent story. The documentary process yields a final product that showcases the knowledge students have acquired, regardless of subject area. Students can use documentaries to understand an issue, its complexity, and the perspectives through which different people view a subject. In an excellent documentary, students show the viewers different perspectives through carefully chosen video clips so the viewers arrive at their own conclusions. In this lesson, originally created by teacher Dan Greenwood, students will choose an issue that impacts them personally, the school, or their community; interview individuals on both sides of the issue; integrate clips about the issue with interview shots to document the issue; create the documentary; and write a reflection detailing the learning process.

Students will:

- Analyze an issue that impacts them personally, the school, or their community
- Plan video clips they need for a documentary and shoot the video (encourage the use of both A-roll and B-roll footage)
- Import videos of interviews and edit and integrate them into usable video clips by using Adobe Premiere Elements 4
- Present their understanding of an issue and its impact through the medium of a documentary
- Provide a written reflection of their learning process

Lesson materials

- Adobe Premiere Elements 4.
- Shot list document
- Student video project proposal
- Digital video camera

Background preparation resources

- Technical skills and information
- Content skill and information
- Standards

Lesson steps

Introduce the project

1. Introduce students to the documentary project. Explain to students that they will work in small groups to create a maximum five-minute documentary about an issue that impacts them personally, the school, or the community. Explain that students will be expected to create the documentary together but will create separate reflections on their process and product.

Note: As part of the introduction, you may want to discuss documentaries as a type of film with your students. Review the background content information for resources to assist you in this discussion.

Preproduction

2. Organize students into small groups of 3–5 students. Have each group select an issue that impacts them personally, impacts the school, or impacts the community. You may want to provide a list of issues to help the students focus on a topic to document.

Note: You may want to provide specific requirements for the documentary if these are younger or inexperienced students, such as number of interviews, number of clips, types of shots, etc.

3. Have each group brainstorm the aspects of the issue they plan to cover and the people they might interview. The more time students spend planning the project, the easier the production process will be.
4. Hand out the project proposal and shot list and have each group complete each document. Explain that each group should list the shots they want to have and check them off as they get them and that they can amend the shot list as they proceed with production of the documentary. You may want to encourage students to utilize both A-roll and B-roll footage. Also explain that they can add footage to the list, but thinking about the core elements of their film ahead of time is always helpful. Some aspects for students to consider when determining their shot list might include:
 - What is the issue and why is it important to the documentary?
 - In what ways does the issue impact them, the school, or the community?
 - Who are some people that are close to this issue, and why?
 - What makes the people close to this issue choose one side over another?
 - In what ways does each side of the issue impact the world or community at large?
 - What is your opinion of the issue?

Student handout: Shot list document

Student handout: Student video project proposal

5. Have students brainstorm a set of questions to use during their interviews. You might have students practice the interviews with other students or with the teacher to make sure they will gather all the necessary information.

Note: You may want to have a discussion about how to conduct an interview and work with students to develop good questions and techniques for the interview. Some aspects to cover might include:

- Structuring questions in ways that do not impose or reveal the student's personal opinion.
- Asking clarifying questions to elicit specific opinions from interviewees.
- Refraining from interrupting each other or the interviewee during the interview.
- Allowing interviewees time to respond even if there are moments of silence (these can be edited out later).
- Taking notes during and after the interview.

Production

6. Have students shoot the video segments (interviews, shots, etc.) they've planned in preproduction. You might demonstrate or go over the tips for shooting video included in the background resources.

Post-production

7. Now that students have their footage, they will download the footage to the computer and begin editing to create the documentary. Students will use Premiere Elements to digitize the footage, cut and move around the clips, add transitions, and add titles. Demonstrate importing video; positioning, editing, and moving video clips; cutting video clips; adding transitions; and adding titles in Premiere Elements to help them build their documentaries.

Adobe Premiere Elements guide: How to import video

Adobe Premiere Elements guide: How to edit clips

Adobe Premiere Elements guide: How to add transitions

Adobe Premiere Elements guide: How to add titles

Adobe Premiere Elements guide: How to add a soundtrack

Adobe Premiere Elements guide: How to record voice narration

Reflection and presentation

8. Have students, individually, reflect on their process and product by writing a brief reflection paper. Some aspects for students to consider might include:
 - How does the final product differ from what you expected to create during the preproduction phase of the project?
 - What challenges did you encounter during the process of planning and creating the documentary? How did you address these challenges?
 - How has your personal opinion on the issue you documented remained the same or changed from creating this documentary?
 - What would you do differently next time you work on a project like this? Why?
 - Briefly explain the pros and cons of working in a group to create a documentary.

9. Have student groups share their documentaries with the class and present the following:
- Explain the steps they took to create the documentary, from planning to post-production.
 - Share the biggest challenge they encountered.
 - Share the biggest success they achieved.
 - Share one aspect of their individual reflections.

Extension activities

You can extend the content of the lesson in the following ways:

- Have students document science experiments and assemble the footage clips to support their analysis of the experiment.
- Have students create a newscast with varying views on topics in science, math, English arts, or civics.
- Have students create a film speaking in a foreign language for a foreign language assignment.

You can extend the technical aspects of the lesson in the following ways:

- Have students use Adobe Contribute CS3 to create a class website about current issues, sharing the documentaries they created. You might have students create campaigns for impacting the issue based on their opinion of it and use their web pages in their campaigns.
- Have students employ advanced special-effects techniques in Premiere Elements and include, in their presentation, an explanation of how the effects impact the overall documentary.

Assessment

- Lesson plan rubric

Background preparation resources

Technical skills and information:

- For more information on the video production process, visit *Introduction to Video: The Making of a Movie* www.adobe.com/education/digkids/intro_video/making_of_movie.html.
- For tips on shooting video, see the *Digital Imaging and Video Tips* www.adobe.com/education/digkids/tips/index.html.
- For an overview of the interface and for more information on the technical aspects of Premiere Elements, see the *Help > Premiere Elements Help*.
- Preparation tips for using this lesson plan:
 - If necessary, work with your school's technology coordinator to help you prepare for the lesson.
 - Install any necessary software on all workstations used for the projects.
 - Prior to teaching this lesson become comfortable with the basics of the software program(s) used in this lesson; use the help section, tutorials, and review the step-by-step technical guides.
 - Find out if your computer setups satisfy all the software system requirements.
 - Prior to teaching this lesson, bookmark all the websites used in the lesson on each computer in your classroom or upload the links to an online bookmarking utility program. Preview all the websites used in the lesson to make certain they are appropriate for your students.
- Vocabulary words:
 - A-roll footage: Footage specifically concerning the topic; for example, an interview.
 - B-roll footage: A sequence of scenes used in place of A-roll footage; for example, footage of a landfill when an interviewee is talking about landfills.

Content skill and information websites about documentaries:

- General information on film and film reviews available at the University of California, Berkeley Film Studies Resources Library www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/filmstudies/index.html
- Chronology of Documentary Film available at the University of California, Berkeley Media Resource Center www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/docexhibit/docuchron.htm
- National Film Board of Canada's Documentary Lens, a website for high school and elementary students and teachers www.onf.ca/objectifdocumentaire/
- *Film & History's* guide to Documentary Films www.h-net.org/~filmhis/documentary_films/documentary_films_guide.htm
- Docs That Inspire, blog and podcast by Joel Heller that celebrates documentary films and filmmakers www.docsthatinspire.com/

Standards

This lesson is aligned to the ISTE NETS*S Technology Standards. Depending on the subject and content area the student selects you may research your own state content standards to see how this lesson aligns to your state requirements.

ISTE NETS*S: Curriculum and Content Area Standards – NETS for Students

1. Creativity and Innovation

Students demonstrate creative thinking, construct knowledge, and develop innovative products and processes using technology. Students:

- b. create original works as a means of personal or group expression.

2. Communication and Collaboration

Students use digital media and environments to communicate and work collaboratively, including at a distance, to support individual learning and contribute to the learning of others. Students:

- a. interact, collaborate, and publish with peers, experts or others employing a variety of digital environments and media.
- b. communicate information and ideas effectively to multiple audiences using a variety of media and formats.
- d. contribute to project teams to produce original works or solve problems.

3. Research and Information Fluency

Students apply digital tools to gather, evaluate, and use information. Students:

- a. plan strategies to guide inquiry.

4. Critical Thinking, Problem-Solving & Decision-Making

Students use critical thinking skills to plan and conduct research, manage projects, solve problems and make informed decisions using appropriate digital tools and resources. Students:

- a. identify and define authentic problems and significant questions for investigation.
- b. plan and manage activities to develop a solution or complete a project.
- c. collect and analyze data to identify solutions and/or make informed decisions.

5. Digital Citizenship

Students understand human, cultural, and societal issues related to technology and practice legal and ethical behavior. Students:

- a. advocate and practice safe, legal, and responsible use of information and technology.
- b. exhibit a positive attitude toward using technology that supports collaboration, learning, and productivity.

6. Technology Operations and Concepts

Students demonstrate a sound understanding of technology concepts, systems and operations. Students:

- b. select and use applications effectively and productively.

Assessment

	Does not meet expectations	Meets expectations	Exceeds expectations
Project proposal	Absent or incomplete citation list	Provides a project proposal.	N/A
Shot list	Absent or incomplete three-page website	Provides a shot list document.	N/A
Documentary film	Absent, incomplete, or unfocused documentary	Documentary is logical, tells a story, and correctly states facts. Documentary includes at least two interviews—one for each side of the issue.	Documentary is clear and compelling. Documentary uses an appropriate communication structure and utilizes quality presentation techniques. Documentary includes two or more interviews for and against the issue as well as some B-roll cutaway shots.
Reflection paper	Absent, incomplete, or unfocused reflection paper detailing learning process	Provides a 1-2 page reflection paper detailing learning process.	Provides a clear and coherent 1–2 page reflection paper detailing learning process.