

The Lincoln Presidential Foundation and Better Angels Society presents:



*Inspiring young filmmakers to interpret history
through documentary filmmaking*

Organizations



Lincoln Presidential Foundation is nonprofit public charity headquartered in Illinois. It is the only national foundation focused on increasing access to history, educational programs, exhibits, and sites highlighting the life and legacy of Abraham Lincoln. The Foundation does its work in cooperation and partnership with others locally, nationally, and globally. Its vision is a world where freedom and democracy flourish, inspired by the life and work of Abraham Lincoln.



The Better Angels Society is a non-profit organization dedicated to educating Americans about their history through documentary film. Our goal is to educate, engage and provoke thoughtful discussion among people of every political persuasion and ideology. We work to ensure historically significant films are completed, broadcast, promoted, and shared in ways that reach and inform as many people as possible through robust educational and civic outreach. The Society is currently raising funds for Ken Burns's films in production and planned over the next ten years.

Part 1

Story Development

Story Development: Intro to Documentary Film



Inspired by Abraham Lincoln's question to an Indianapolis crowd during his inaugural journey — *"Shall the Union and shall the liberties of this country be preserved to the latest generation ?"*—the contest encourages young filmmakers aged 14-22 to create documentary films that explore history.

For more information on the contest:
<https://www.lincolnpresidential.org/events/latest-generation-film-contest/>

A documentary film is a
non-fiction motion picture
intended to "document reality,"
past or present.

What documentaries have you
seen that have shaped your
worldview?

Why do we make documentary films?

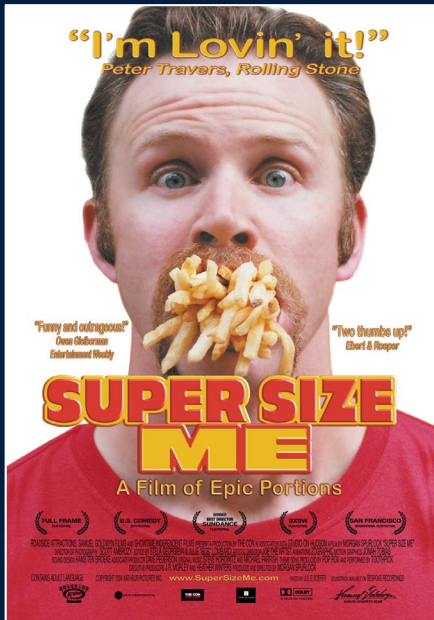
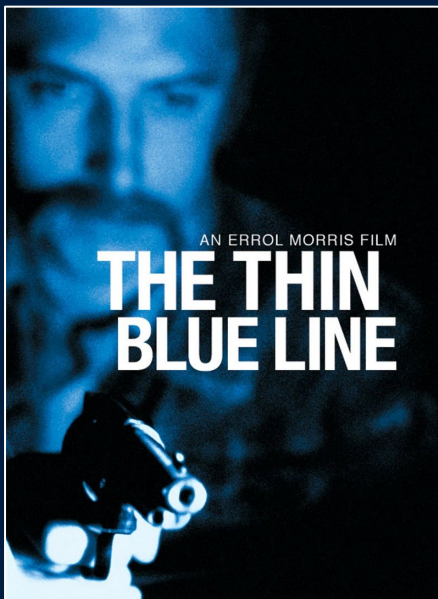
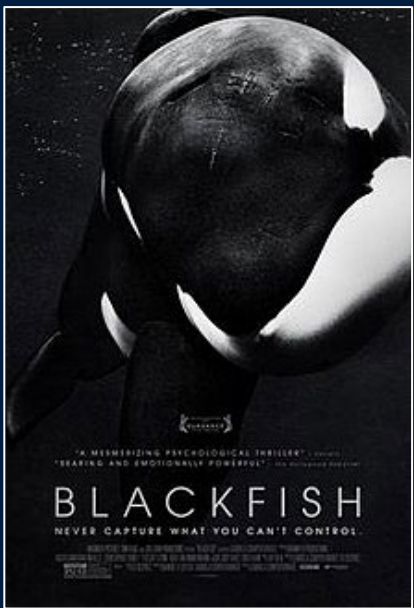
create a better understanding of
history with details and depth

look into someone else's life to
better understand them

challenge stereotypes & create
more compassion for others

truth -telling;
correcting history

get a message out; spread awareness on
important topics



Documentaries that
made a big splash!



I. Genres

Story Development

What are the major genres of documentaries?

A documentary genre reflects who or what the story is about

- **Ethnographic:** observation of a people and their culture, often shared from an anthropological lens
- **Historical:** past events or people
- **Biographical:** a person of importance
- **Topical:** a specific topic
- **Character Driven:** follows everyday people and often reveals aspects of our shared humanity
- **Experimental:** blurs the lines of storytelling in order to delve into more philosophic or metaphoric ideas or concepts

Optional Exercise #1

List **three** historical topics related to “stories of people in the United States who faced milestone changes or generational challenges with creative ideas and bold action” that you’d be interested in exploring. Align them with the major genres of documentaries.

- Ethnographic
- Historical
- Biographical
- Topical
- Character Driven
- Experimental

Optional Exercise #1 Examples

Examples

Historical

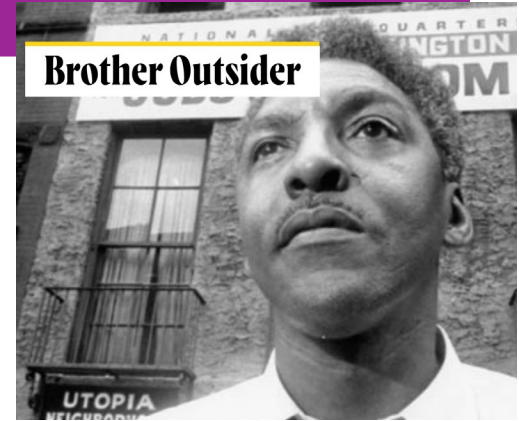
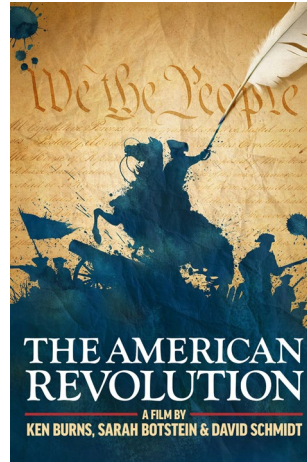
The American Revolution, a landmark documentary by Ken Burns, Sarah Botstein, and David Schmidt

Character Driven

The Central Park Five

Biographical

Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin



II. Narration Styles

Story Development

There are four types of documentary narration styles.

Narration style refers to HOW the story is told.



1. Interview-led

In the editing process, the characters' answers are weaved together to form the story. The interviews are then usually overlayed with [b-roll footage](#), photos or animation to visualize the experiences and emotions the characters are talking about.



1. Interview-led

PROS

- A very simple and effective way to tell a story as you're able to communicate the exact thoughts and ideas of your characters through the interviews.
- If your characters are emotionally expressive and compelling on camera, interviews are a great way of showing this.

CONS

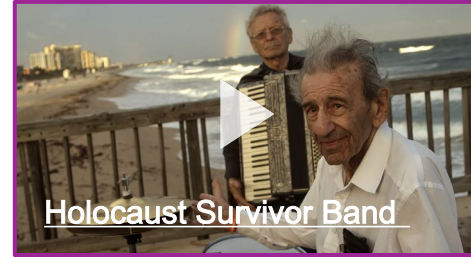
- Less control over how the story is told as the story is built out of interviews rather than a script being read by a voiceover artist or a presenter. For a short film, it makes developing a clean story structure more difficult.
- Hard for today's audiences to watch "talking heads" versus visually stimulating media. Also, if one of your characters speaks in a monotone, it can be dull to listen to.

Story Development: II. Narration Styles

Student Interview-led



Professional Interview-led



2. Narrator -led

Footage or images are shown with a narrator's voice describing the story. Often, the narrator will be providing context to a scene or giving the audience additional information to a sequence.



*Traces of the Trade: A Story
from the Deep North*

2. Narrator -led

PROS

- You have more control over crafting the story as you can write the voiceover script yourself and tell the audience what's going on.
- It's much easier from a technical standpoint to record scripted audio versus getting clean sound onsite.

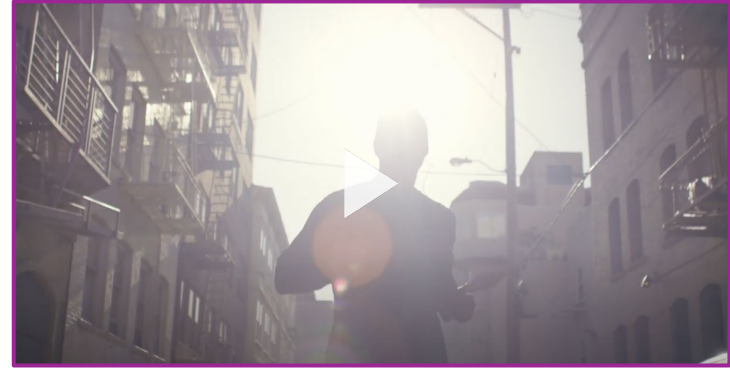
CONS

- If you're too heavy-handed with the visuals, the story can lose authenticity. You also have to be careful not to select b-roll that doesn't fit and takes you out of the story.

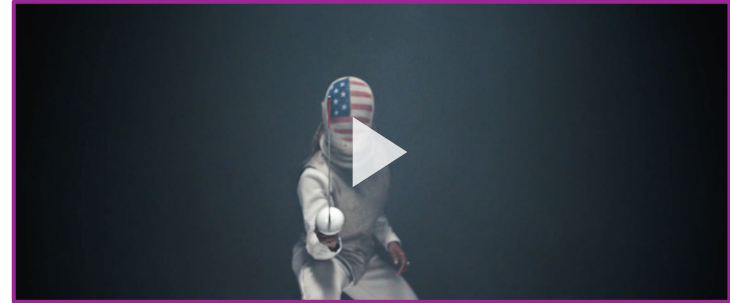
Story Development: II. Narration Styles



Student Narrator-led



Professional Narrator-led



3. Presenter-led

The presenter could be the filmmaker themselves, a journalist, actor, media personality or an expert that is knowledgeable in a particular area. The presenter appears on camera, conducts interviews, and may also do voice-overs for parts of the film. With this style, often the emotion of the story will come from the presenter's feelings and perspectives about the topic, as well as coming from any characters they may interview as part of the film.



3. Presenter-led

PROS

- It can be a great way to give a focus and center point to a larger story. For example, with a documentary based around an issue a presenter helps tie all the interviews together and we go on a journey with the presenter.

CONS

- It can sometimes distract audiences from the main ideas of the story.
- It can be expensive if you're wanting to hire a professional presenter.



Student Presenter-led

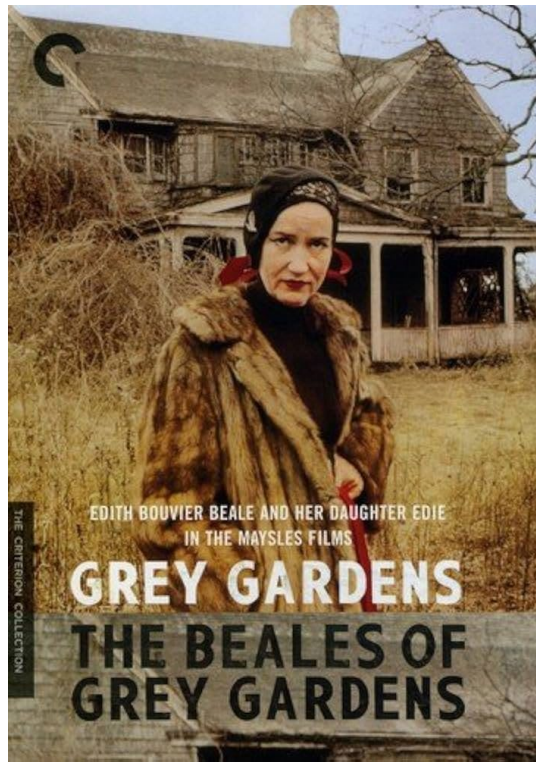


Professional Presenter-led

4. Observational -led

When the filmmakers invite each viewer to draw their own conclusions from the film, without an interviewee, presenter, or voiceover to narrate the story.

This style is also called 'fly-on-the-wall' or 'vérité' filmmaking. It's mainly used to show events or real-life situations in which the camera follows someone – or a group of people – around. It's as though the audience is just an invisible spectator, and this style is meant to give the feeling that the camera isn't there. This means the main emotion of the story will come directly from the action that takes place and the conversations between characters.



4. Observational -led

PROS

- When done well it can be one of the most truthful and raw types of documentaries to watch.
- It also allows the audience to engage with the story from an objective point of view and make their own decisions about the subject of the story.

CONS

- This type of narration style can be incredibly time-consuming as waiting for engaging events to unfold in real-time can take months if not years - so you have to be patient if you're going to make your documentary using this narration style.

Story Development: II. Narration Styles



Observational-led Shorts



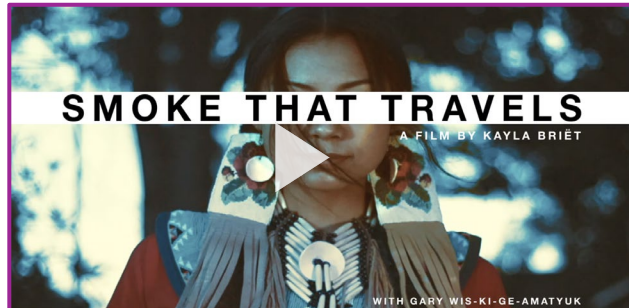
Observational-led Features



Narration Style Post -discussion



Which of the four narrative styles do you feel was most effective?
Which of the films engaged you most and why?



Optional Exercise #2

Go back to the three historical topics you would like to explore and select the one you are **MOST** interested in developing further by picking a narration-style you think would be the best fit.

For example:

- If you are dealing with a topic that has a **subject who can speak on your topic now** , “interview-led” might be a good option. List potential specialists or individuals who could share their lived experiences.
- If you are looking far in the past and **want to flex your animation or graphic design skills** , narrator-led might work great.
- If you are **super comfortable being in front of the camera** making YouTube shorts or TikToks, presenter-led could be the perfect fit!



III. Storytelling Devices

Story Development

How do we create mood through visual style and sound?

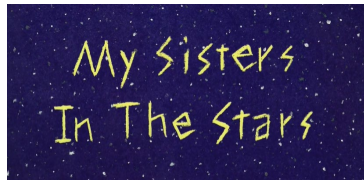
For historical documentaries, it can be challenging to make the past interesting relying on archival photos and videos only.

To make a short film compelling, filmmakers must get creative! This might include adding stop motion, time-lapse, special effects or animation.

Selecting the right soundtrack and adding sound effects is equally important.



Exploring Documentary Storytelling Devices



- **Archival Photos & Videos**

- [My Favorite Picture of You](#) (3:24)

How were the photos and videos presented to make it feel more dynamic? What did you notice about the sounds accompanying the dialogue? Did you see what the filmmaker did to make the sequence of photographs and videos more cohesive?

- **Archival Photos, Art, and Stop Motion**

- [Gan-Gan](#) (2:35)

How would you describe the effect of this style? Did it help connect you to her Gan-Gan? What did you feel about the pacing and the choice of music?

- **Animation**

- [*My Sister in the Stars](#) (9:55) *student made, fest winner (MUST SEE)

Did you feel the animation was effective in allowing us to relive her story? What else did you see or hear that made the short feel more visceral?

Exploring Documentary Storytelling Devices , *continued*

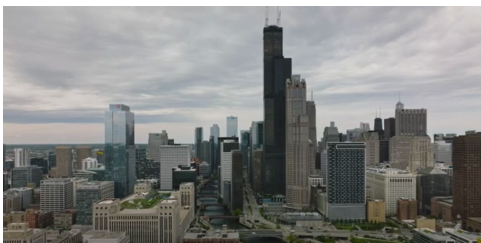
- **Archival Images using Parallax & Special Effects**

- [DePaul University: A Story of Transformation](#) (first few mins)

Did you feel the parallaxing worked to bring the early photographs to life?

- **Re-enactments**

- [A Compassionate Spy Trailer](#) (2:00) - using actors to recreate important scenes or help the audience connect to the story
- [The Missing Picture Trailer](#) (1:56) - using clay figures



Optional Exercise #3

Which storytelling devices did you find most interesting or compelling?

- Which ones would you want to explore for your short documentary film idea? Jot down anything you see in your “mind’s eye” that might be an important visual whether literal or metaphoric.
- What will the mood/tone be? Will it be slow or fast paced? How will it sound? Should it be dramatic, hopeful, peaceful? Maybe it will evolve throughout?



IV. Story Structure

Story Development

What's the primary message?

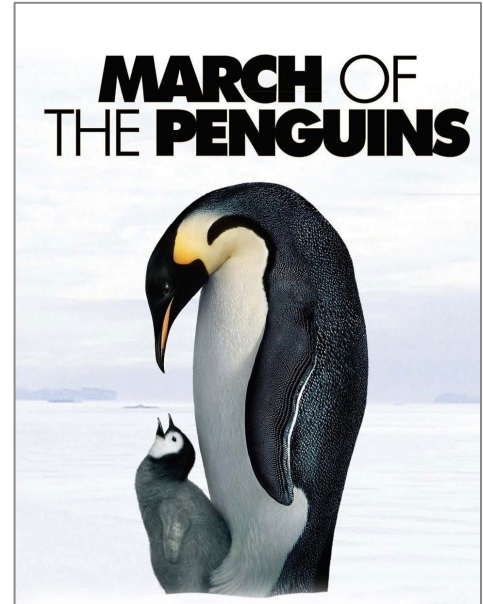
Now, it's time to establish a theme and the main points you want to explore.

Specifically, **you'll want a hook;** a reason for the audience to care. What is unique or interesting about this subject? What about this past event or person is relevant to people today? In English essay terms, what question are you answering?



Optional Exercise #4.1

In one sentence, write down what the primary message of the story will be. Remember, messages that include a universal theme or a personal component are most successful.



How do we structure short films?

Classic Film Structure

A good story must have a strong THEME with a beginning (Act 1), middle (Act 2), and end (Act 3).

- Beginning: What's the set-up? What's the hook?
- Middle: What's the conflict or need? What's the universal theme?
- End: What is the answer? How will you wrap it up?

The classic film ratio breakdown for the screen time if each section is:

25% beginning | 50% middle | 25 % end

How do we structure short films?

Example: Classic Film Structure



Beginning 0:00-0:45 (45 secs)

Middle 0:45-2:15 (90 secs)

End 2:15-3:00 (45 secs)

Optional Exercise #4.2

Break down your film topic into the Classic Film Structure given the contest's film requirement of 5-8 minutes.

Add as much detail as you can in terms of what you will include in each section (beginning, middle, end):

Interview, archival materials, b-roll, subjects, animation, etc.

If you plan on writing a narration, keep in mind that 1-page of double-spaced dialogue is roughly equal to about 1 minute on screen, which is why it's important to condense and crystalize your main points.

For a 5-min short:

1:15: Introduction to the topic / hook

2:30: support for your primary message (conflict)

1:15: wrap-up idea

For an 8-min short:

2:00: Introduction to the topic / hook

4:00: support for your primary message (conflict)

2:00: wrap-up idea



Optional Exercise #4.3

Browse [Vimeo's Documentary Staff Picks](#) or search “award winning short doc” on YouTube and find one they really like. Report back:

- What is the genre of the documentary?
- What is the narration style?
- What storytelling devices did they use to support their message?
- What did you most appreciate about the film?



Contest



Check out previous winners of the Latest Generation Film Contest:

<https://www.lincolnpresidential.org/events/latest-generation-film-contest/past-film-contest-winnders/>

For more information the contest:

<https://www.lincolnpresidential.org/events/latest-generation-film-contest/>