



**COMM 369-001 . DOCUMENTARY FILM PRODUCTION . SPRING 2024  
MKC 120 . MONDAYS 12:20-3PM . 3 CREDITS  
BRIDGEWATER STATE UNIVERSITY**

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*You have to understand, my dears, that the shortest distance between truth and a human being is a story.*  
Anthony de Mello

Instructor: Colleen Kelly Poplin  
cpoplin@bridgew.edu  
617-702-2653

Office Hours: Wednesdays 12-2p / Thursdays 11a-12p  
Maxwell Library 215B  
Sign up at [calendly.com/colleenkellypoplin](https://calendly.com/colleenkellypoplin)

### **COURSE DESCRIPTION**

Prerequisite: COMM 106. Students will learn the fundamentals of producing a documentary film and develop an understanding of the history, theories, and styles of the genre.

In this course, you will face the unique challenges of being a documentary filmmaker: managing ethical decisions (should I trick this uncooperative interview subject?) and coping with technical issues (my subject said the best thing ever and there was too much background noise!), all while struggling to create an artistic representation of our shared reality. It's a wild and glorious ride!

### **COURSE OBJECTIVES**

Through readings, screenings, discussion, and production assignments, we will attempt to answer these questions:

- What are the defining characteristics of documentary storytelling?
- What is a documentary filmmaker's responsibility to their viewers? And their subjects?
- How is a filmmaker's "voice" represented in their films?
- How does the process of creating the documentary differ from fiction filmmaking? How may it be similar?

### **LEARNING OUTCOMES**

After successful completion of this course, students should be able to:

- Understand the role of the documentary filmmaker as an artist and social being
- Display working knowledge of digital field production and post-production technology
- Recognize viable strategies for developing and structuring documentary narratives
- Utilize screen grammar and visual storytelling devices effectively in a range of documentary genres
- Know how to receive, process, and implement criticism and constructively critique the work of others

## PARTICIPATION / ATTENDANCE

This course requires informed and committed participation. You will get much more out of this course if you are fully engaged.

Research indicates that using laptops in class is a significant distraction that leads to a sharp decline in academic performance. This is true not only for the primary user, but also for students sitting nearby. As such, laptops are fine when we are researching or doing group work, but they are not allowed during lectures or screenings. Do your peers a solid and comply.

Since we only meet once per week and do a significant amount of work in class, I am compelled to have an attendance policy. Two absences or less is fine. Three absences wipe out all points allotted to your participation grade (15% of overall grade). Four or more absences means, in the wise words of Gandalf, you shall not pass.

## COURSE READINGS

We will be working from *Directing the Documentary, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition* by Michael Rabiger. All other handouts and readings will be available on Blackboard. Everything I distribute in class will also be uploaded to Blackboard.

## REQUIRED EQUIPMENT

You will have access to BSU cameras, lights, microphones, Adobe Premiere software, and other equipment for your projects. Equipment access is limited, so reserve all gear as early as possible. We will go over the equipment checkout process in greater detail in class. If you would like to use your own camera, microphones, lights, etc., let's have a conversation. You will need the following:

- One external hard drive, at least 1TB (you could go for 500GB, but you'll likely need 1TB+ in future courses)
- One or two SDXC memory card(s), at least 128GB (you could go for 64GB, but you'll likely need 128GB+ in future courses)
- *Recommended:* [Adobe Premiere Pro Complete Beginner's Guide](#)
- *Recommended:* production is easier with a multi-tool (I have a Swiss Army Evolution 11)

## GRADING

This course is based on the principle that the more you practice, the better you become. Use every assignment to communicate what is important to you and take risks. You will earn your grade via the following:

Participation	15%
Production Project: Life As It Unfolds	25%
- Proposal / pre-production	
- Completed project	
Production Project: Interview Profile	25%
- Bio and questions	
- Interview string	
- Completed project	
Production Project: Final Project	35%
- Proposal / pre-production	
- Principal photography	
- Completed project	

93 to 100% = A
90 to 92.9% = A-
87 to 89.9% = B+
83 to 86.9% = B
80 to 82.9% = B-
77 to 79.9% = C+
73 to 76.9% = C
70 to 72.9% = C-
67 to 69.9% = D+
63 to 66.9% = D
60 to 62.9% = D-
0 to 59.9% = F

## ASSIGNMENTS

Further details on all assignments will be shared in class. Blackboard will help you keep yourself organized.

We screen each project the day it is due, and I also provide detailed video feedback to each student project. Late projects negatively impact both course objectives. If a project is not ready to screen on its due date, it will be docked ten points and will receive limited feedback. If a project is more than one week late, it will be docked twenty points and will receive only a grade with no feedback.

### Production Project: Life As It Unfolds (25% of final grade)

Find someone or something going through a process. Show the process unfolding from start to finish in a 3- to 5-minute direct cinema / observational mode project. Use this project to practice your documentary cinematography, paying particular attention to composition, varied framing, the exposure triangle, and motivated camera movement. Completed projects must not exceed 5 minutes. Projects will be evaluated for the successful execution of your idea, originality of concept, and production value. YouTube will be used for submission. Details will be shared in class.

- Proposal / pre-production (2/12)
- Completed project (2/21)

### Production Project: Interview Profile (25% of final grade)

Select someone outside of the BSU community to interview for at least one hour. What is their story? What makes them who they are? You will assemble a 4- to 6-minute rough cut interview string and present it to the class for feedback (part one). You will then incorporate feedback and add B-roll and archival material to produce a finished profile piece (part two). Completed projects must not exceed 6 minutes. Projects will be evaluated for the successful execution of your idea, originality of concept, and production value. YouTube will be used for submission. Details will be shared in class.

- Bio and questions (3/11)
- Interview string (3/18)
- Completed project (3/25)

### Production Project: Final Project (35% of final grade)

You will create a 5- to 7-minute documentary of any form and subject. The parameters for the final project are purposefully open so that you can develop your own personal style and documentary voice. You will present your proposal to the class for feedback. You will also screen a rough cut in individual production meetings with me and incorporate the feedback we discuss into your completed project. Completed projects must not exceed 7 minutes. Projects will be evaluated for the successful execution of your idea, originality of concept, and production value. YouTube will be used for submission. Details will be shared in class.

- Proposal / pre-production (4/1)
- Individual rough cut meeting (4/22)
- Completed project (4/29)

## DRAFT SCHEDULE

Syllabus is subject to change, but you will always be informed. See Blackboard for more details.

Week 1: January 22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Micro-docs: Crash course in documentary production</li><li>- Get to know each other</li><li>- Syllabus review</li></ul>
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	<p><i>Before our next class:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Watch <i>Cameraperson</i> (2016)</li> <li>- Read Rabiger, Chapter 2: <i>The Nature of Documentary</i></li> <li>- Read Rabiger, Chapter 3: <i>Documentary History</i></li> </ul>
<p>Week 2: January 29</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Expository Mode</li> <li>- <i>How can we define documentary film?</i></li> <li>- <i>How did documentary filmmaking get started?</i></li> </ul> <p><i>Before our next class:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Read Rabiger, Chapter 12: <i>Camera</i></li> <li>- Watch <i>Gimme Shelter</i> (1970)</li> <li>- Read Maysles, <i>Documentary Commandments</i> (Blackboard)</li> </ul>
<p>Week 3: February 5</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Observational Mode</li> <li>- Camera workshop / documentary cinematography</li> <li>- Production Project: <i>Life As It Unfolds</i> assigned</li> </ul> <p><i>Before our next class:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Read Rabiger, Chapter 21: <i>Values, Ethics, and Choices</i></li> <li>- Read Pryluck, <i>Ultimately We Are All Outsiders</i> and <i>Whose Life Is It Anyway?</i> (Blackboard)</li> </ul>
<p>Week 4: February 12</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Observational Mode, continued</li> <li>- <i>What is "direct cinema"?</i></li> <li>- <i>Why are ethical issues central to documentary filmmaking?</i></li> <li>- Production Project: <i>Life As It Unfolds</i> proposal due</li> </ul> <p><i>Next Monday is Presidents' Day; see you on 2/21</i></p>
<p>Week 5: February 21 (Wed)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Production Project: <i>Life As It Unfolds</i> due</b></li> <li>- Screen <i>Life As It Unfolds</i> projects and provide feedback</li> </ul> <p><i>Before our next class:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Read Rabiger, Chapter 11: <i>Lighting</i></li> <li>- Watch <i>Tarnation</i> (2003)</li> </ul>
<p>Week 6: February 26</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Participatory Mode</li> <li>- Lighting workshop / documentary cinematography</li> <li>- Production Project: <i>Interview Profile</i> assigned (determine subject before 3/11)</li> </ul> <p><i>Next week is Spring Break; see you on 3/11</i></p> <p><i>Before our next class:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Read Rabiger, Chapter 13: <i>Directing</i></li> <li>- Read Rabiger, Chapter 17: <i>Point of View and Storytelling</i></li> <li>- Read Rabiger, Chapter 10: <i>Capturing Sound</i></li> </ul>
<p>Week 7: March 11</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Art of the Interview</li> <li>- Audio workshop</li> <li>- Submit bio of interview subject; in-class workshop on crafting questions</li> </ul>

	<p><i>Before our next class:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Read Rabiger, Chapter 31: <i>Conducting and Shooting Interviews</i></li> <li>- Read Block, <i>6 Tips for Getting Your Subject to Open Up on Camera</i> (Blackboard)</li> <li>- Read Irving, <i>Beyond the Talking Head...</i> (Blackboard)</li> </ul>
Week 8: March 18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interview string complete with 4- to 6-minute rough cut</li> <li>- Peer review of interview rough cut</li> <li>- Discuss the use of archival footage and B-roll</li> <li>- In-class production workshop</li> </ul>
Week 9: March 25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Production Project: Interview Profile due</b></li> <li>- Screen The Interview projects and provide feedback</li> <li>- Production Project: Final Project assigned</li> </ul> <p><i>Before our next class:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Read Rabiger, Chapter 6: <i>Developing Story Ideas</i></li> <li>- Read Wissot, <i>Whose Story?: Five Doc-Makers on (Avoiding) Extractive Filmmaking</i> (Blackboard)</li> </ul>
Week 10: April 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The Reflexive, Poetic, and Performative Modes</li> <li>- <i>What gives documentaries a voice of their own?</i></li> <li>- <i>What makes documentaries engaging and persuasive?</i></li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Production Project: Final Project proposal due</b></li> <li>- Peer review of proposals</li> <li>- Schedule individual rough cut meetings</li> </ul> <p><i>Before our next class:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Read Rabiger, Chapter 14: <i>Creating the First Assembly</i></li> <li>- Read Rabiger, Chapter 15: <i>Editing for Refinement</i></li> </ul>
Week 11: April 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>I am traveling for the total eclipse. Course plans TBD.</i></li> <li>- Majority of principal photography shot; post-production started</li> </ul> <p><i>Next week is Patriots' Day; see you on 4/22</i></p> <p><i>Before our next class:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Read Rabiger, Chapter 18: <i>Dramatic Development, Time, and Story Structure</i></li> </ul>
Week 12: April 22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Individual rough cut meetings</li> <li>- In-class post-production continued</li> </ul>
Week 13: April 29	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Production Project: Final Project due</b></li> <li>- Screen final projects and provide feedback</li> </ul>
Week 14: May 1-7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Final project feedback sessions (details forthcoming)</li> <li>- Cry about how much we will miss each other</li> </ul>

## SUPPORT RESOURCES

In the words of the Beatles, we get by with a little help from our friends. BSU offers a host of magical support resources:

### Academic Achievement Center and Student Accessibility Services

On the ground floor of the Maxwell Library, the Academic Achievement Center (AAC) provides [academic advising](#), [learning assistance](#) (both tutoring and academic coaching), and [testing services](#). There is also support available for English language learners. You can connect with [Student Accessibility Services \(SAS\)](#) by [scheduling online](#), reaching out via [email](#), or by calling 508-531-2194.

### Wellness Center

The [Wellness Center](#) (Weygand Hall) offers a range of vital services and support to help you achieve physical and emotional wellness. Whether you need physical or mental health advice, assistance in a crisis, tips for managing stress, or care for a specific condition, the Wellness Center will hook you up.

### Maxwell Library

For borrowing or renewing items, access to computers, study rooms, and more, visit the [Maxwell Library](#).

### Information Technology (IT)

For all technology questions and assistance, the [Information Technology Division](#) provides [Student Technology Support](#) on the ground floor of the Maxwell Library and through the [IT Self Service Portal](#).

### Career Services

The [Career Services Office](#) can be found in the Rondileau Student Union. They offer appointments, programs, events, and resources for your future career. Side note: their website links to an external resource I recommend called [What Can I Do with This Major?](#)

### Financial Assistance

The [Financial Aid Office](#) is on West Campus in the Welcome Center. They can assist you and your family in affording the cost of your education through grants, loans, student work programs, and financial counselors. There is also a [Student Emergency Fund](#) if you need help purchasing course supplies. If you are having trouble accessing food to eat, I highly recommend BSU's Food Pantry on the lower level of Rondileau Student Union.

### Office of Equal Opportunity and Title IX

The [Office of Equal Opportunity and the Title IX Coordinator](#) work to ensure that all members of the campus community flourish in a supportive and fair climate. Their [website](#) has a page for [Title IX](#) and a page for Discrimination and Harassment for reporting concerns of sexual violence, relationship violence, stalking, sexual harassment, or protected category-based discrimination and harassment. Additionally, the Sexual Violence Advocacy and Support Center is a *confidential* support resource for anyone who has experienced sexual, gender-based, or relationship violence or stalking. Seek support via this form: [SVAS Center Support Form](#)

### Pride Center

BSU's Pride Center supports gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students and their allied peers to foster a campus climate of inclusion and equity. Visit the [Pride Center website](#) to learn more about their services and events.