**Unit 1: FILM AS NARRATIVE Documentary Film Viewing Guide  
English 9A COMMON TASK: Evaluate a Work of Art**



*A documentary film is a non-fiction*[*motion picture*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Film)*intended to*[*document*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Document)*some aspect of*[*reality*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reality)*, primarily for the purposes of instruction, education, or maintaining a*[*historical record*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recorded_history)*.*

Name:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Period: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Group Members: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Step 1. Pre-Viewing**

Title of Documentary: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Date Released: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Director(s): \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

What do you think you will see in this documentary? List two concepts or ideas that you might expect to see based on the **title** of the documentary or list what you already know about this documentary:

1.

2.

**Step 2. Viewing**

**1. Type of documentary (check where applicable):**

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Advocacy for social concerns \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Biography

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Career Profile \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Community History

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Research/Factual \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Investigative

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ News/Special Events \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Nature  
  
**2. Physical qualities of the film: *Describe all that apply.***

a) Music: Describe the type of instruments or genre of music used and the intended tone.

b) Live action: Describe examples of the live action.

c) Narration/voice over: Describe who is telling the story.

d) Background noise/Special effects: Record sounds you hear that you do not attribute to instruments.

e) Animation:

f) Color/Black and white: Was color or black and white images intentionally used for effect? If so, discuss.

g) Interviews: Who did the filmmaker interview and for what purpose? Were they experts? What were their professions/titles?

h) Dramatizations or reenactments: What was reenacted?

i) Archival footage: Was any used? If so, describe it.

**3. Discuss how cinematic elements or editing contribute to creating an atmosphere in this documentary:**

Lighting:

Camera Angles: Do any low, high or eye-level angles stand out? Why?

Camera Shots/Angles: Do any close-up, long, or medium shots stand out? Why?

Sound: What is the *purpose* of what the filmmaker is making sure you can hear?

Diegetic: Sound emanates from a source in the film. (Ex: Car horns honking in traffic scene)

Nondiegetic: Sound that cannot logically be part of the film environment. (Ex: Soft violin playing while child is crying and telling a sad story)

How does the film make you feel?

What is the TONE of the documentary? (This is the filmmaker’s attitude toward the subject of the film.)

What emotions does the documentary evoke in its viewers? (MOOD)

**Step 3. Post-viewing (or repeated viewing)**

Circle the things that you listed in the previewing activity that were validated by your viewing of the documentary, then answer the following:

**1. What is/are the central message(s) of this documentary? Be specific. Use *examples* from the documentary to support your choice.**

**2. Discuss the bias in the documentary (point of view of the filmmakers). What might they be leaving out, simplifying or rearranging for effect?** *Note: If observational or ‘fly-on-the-wall’ filmmaking occupies one end of the spectrum, and journalistic docs that aim to present a variety of views occupy the middle ground, then the other end of the vast orbit of documentary styles is held down by films explicitly designed for cinematic impact to deliver the filmmaker’s bias and point of view. In his seminal “Directing the Documentary,” doc educator Michael Rabiger concedes, “Like journalism, documentary filmmaking involves reduction, simplification, rearrangement and re-creation — all hazardous to the truth.”   
(Source: https://www.videomaker.com/article/c06/18569-documentary-bias-rearranging-the-truth)*

**3. Consider the effectiveness of the film in communicating its message. As a tool of communication, what are its strengths and weaknesses? Give the score a 1-10 (10 being highest) for effectiveness in message delivery: \_\_\_\_\_\_/10**

Strengths:

Weaknesses:

**4. How do you think the filmmakers wanted the audience to respond? What evidence is there that the filmmaker was looking for this response?**

**5. Does this film appeal to the viewer's reason (logos) or emotion (pathos)?   
Explain the role of each in this documentary.**

**6. Write a question to the filmmaker that is left unanswered by his/her documentary. Do you believe the** **question was left unanswered purposefully? Why or why not?**