



MAKING A DOCUMENTARY

PART A. Just like fiction films, documentaries have a story, characters, a point of view and a theme. They may use sound, music or narration to compliment or contrast with the visuals. Some films may have no sound except the voices of the people onscreen. Visuals can include footage of the subjects, still photographs, interviews, animation, home movies, advertising graphics and stock footage.

Because they do not deal with fictionalized subjects, documentaries are often expected to be objective, that is, to tell a story without taking an obvious position or showing bias. Many documentarians do try to show both sides of an issue, but even objective films are shaped by the interests and thoughts of the filmmaker.

Watch the documentary or sequence that your teacher has chosen. Complete the answers to these questions on the back of this page.

What is the subject of the film?

Who are the characters?

Is the film told from a subjective or objective point of view? How do you know that?

Why do you think the filmmaker chose to tell the story this way?

How do you think the film would be different if it had been a fiction film?

What kinds of sound does the filmmaker use? Is silence an important part of the soundtrack?

How do music, sound and image work together to convey the story of the documentary?

PART B. Every choice that documentary filmmakers make about what to show (and what not to show) and what order to show it in reflects their attitudes toward the subject and affects the film's impact on the audience. With your classmates, choose a series of pictures from magazines or other sources. One

Direct cinema is a style of documentary filmmaking that tries to observe its subject with as little interference as possible. Generally, the filmmakers do not ask questions on the soundtrack and the film does not have narration.

Documentaries in which the audience is aware of the filmmaker's opinions are called subjective documentaries. They may tell the filmmaker's personal story, or they may start with strong personal beliefs about a subject.

Documentary filmmakers organize the material in many different ways, depending on the kind of story they are telling. Films may be arranged in chronological order, they may move back and forth in time, or they may show several different interlaced stories, for example.

group will arrange them to illustrate a story in a straightforward, realistic way. The second group will then take these same pictures and rearrange them to illustrate the story in a different way, perhaps giving the story a humorous slant or arranging the pictures in non-chronological order. Study the two sequences of pictures, and describe the differences between them. For example, is one more entertaining? Does one make the story clearer? What else is different about the way each one tells the story?

Did the meaning change? Explain.

Which arrangement seems more truthful? Why?

Which arrangement do you like better? Why?

For his documentary *The Thin Blue Line*, Errol Morris re-enacted a murder according to the testimony of several different witnesses. The scenes demonstrate the contradictions in the witnesses' testimony. An example of the way meaning changes depending on who is telling the story is the "telephone" game. Compare the last version of the story to the original version. Does the last version change the core of the story or only the details?

What does this exercise tell you about the truthfulness of what is seen and heard on film?

