

# ENGW 1302 Project #1: Definitional Essay

## (Worth 5% of your grade; due on January 26)

### Overview

Documentary work is the core theme of this course, and we will return to it repeatedly during the semester. For our first project, you will write a tight, focused essay answering the question, “What is documentary work?”

Robert Coles raises the question of how one’s own position as observer—one’s own background, values, goals, and beliefs—affects “the attempt to ascertain what is, what can be noted, recorded, pictured; and that of presentation—how to elicit the interest of others, and how to provide a context.” Even “objective” narratives are narratives constructed by the observer for the audience. Word choices, composition, selection, and emphasis are the stuff of constructed reality. In examining Weegee’s (Arthur Fellig’s) photojournalism (in *Convergences*), Wendy Lesser asks us to consider how choices that photographer made affect how we see the reality of his subjects’ lives.

This assignment asks you to learn from Coles and Lesser and to find on your own one audio or photograph example of what you would argue is “documentary work” (I will point you to possible resources). When you have found that example, use it as a springboard to put Coles’s and Lesser’s ideas into action by posing your own coherent definition of documentary work.

### Guiding Questions

Using Coles, Lesser, and your own ideas, please be sure to address all of these guiding questions:

- What are the essential characteristics of documentary work? (In other words, how do you know documentary work when you see/read/watch/hear it?)
- How is documentary work meaningfully different from other, possibly similar work?
- How does the example you found fit the characteristics of documentary work as you have defined it?
- What framing, emphasis, and selection choices are evident in the example you found? (The logical next questions are: So what? What difference do those choices make?)

### Assignment Details

Your finished essay should be approximately 750 words long, formatted with double-spacing and using non-ridiculous fonts and margins. You do not need a formal Works Cited page for this assignment, but your essay should use in-text citations for every instance of borrowed words or ideas from Coles and/or Lesser. Any additional sources should be cited in such a way that I can find the same sources using the information you provide. Finally, you should insert the image(s) or provide a URL to the example you have chosen to support your argument.

Your essay should be meticulously edited and proofread. Even though you will have a chance to revise this essay, you should treat this first submission as a final draft. To submit your essay for evaluation, bring a printed copy of your document to class on Wednesday, January 26.

## **Evaluation Criteria**

I will evaluate your essay based on how well it:

- provides a succinct, clear definition of documentary work.
- answers all of the guiding questions, not just some or most of them.
- supports its claims with sound logic and reasoning.
- draws upon your outside example to support and extend your definition.
- justifies your choice of this particular example of documentary work and explains why that example is useful and interesting.
- adheres to the conventions of standard written English (i.e., spelling, punctuation, grammar).