

# ENGW 1302 Projects #4 and #5:

## Digital Documentary Film (and Prospectus)

(Project #4: Worth 10% of your grade; Project #5: Worth 30% of your grade)

“I don’t know what truth is. Truth is something unattainable. We can’t think we’re creating truth with a camera. But what we can do, is reveal something to viewers that allows them to discover their own truth.”

— Michel Brault

### Overview

For the remainder of the semester, you will work in a small team to create a short digital documentary film about a subject of interest to the St. Edward’s or greater Austin communities. To succeed on these assignments, you will need to complete these tasks well:

- **Consider several aspects of your topic** that your team could pursue for this project. As you do so, don’t just think about which part of your topic would make for the “easiest” project; ask yourselves, “Which film would we want to see the most?” “Which film might offer a fresh take on this topic?” Audiences can tell the difference between “settled for first thing that came to mind” and “dug deep.”
- **Conduct preliminary research** on your topic to ensure that you will have access to the people and artifacts you plan to document in your film. Secure commitments from everyone you expect will make an appearance in your film. Don’t skimp on research. Know your subject.
- **Write a detailed written prospectus** outlining your plans for this project, using the template provided to you by your professor.
- **Document your subject** using video, audio, and photography. This work may include sifting through document archives, interviewing participants or experts, taking still photographs, filming live events, etc. Go to where the information is and to where the relevant people are.
- **Aggregate the best of your raw materials** into a rough cut of your team’s film. Expect to have about a 10:1 ratio between raw and edited footage.
- **Edit your rough cut** into tight, polished film that seamlessly blends still images, video, spoken audio, and background music into a tight, effective, interesting documentary film of which you can be proud.
- **Screen your film** for your classmates and the students in our paired section of Honors ENGW 1302.
- **Reflect on your work** in a short essay submitted to your professor.

### Project #4: Written Prospectus

To ensure that your team does not begin work on your film until you are ready, you will create a written prospectus that describes in detail your plans for the film project. This document will (1) propose a subject and title, (2) describe your target audience, (3) outline your pre-existing knowledge about your subject, (4) explain how your film will provide a “fresh take” on the subject, (5) list your possible sources and describe your plans for getting access to those sources, and (6) pledge your commitment to a code of ethics and cooperation. I will provide you with a template that will help you draft a successful prospectus, but you will need to do more than “fill in the blanks”—your prospectus needs to exhibit original thought and effective prose. As you write this document, think of it as a “pitch” to a wealthy producer who has the

power to finance your film. Your prospectus should be carefully written, meticulously edited, and highly persuasive.

**Your prospectus is due electronically no later than noon on Saturday, April 9.** I will meet with your team on Monday, April 11, to discuss and (I hope) to approve your document. **If your prospectus is successful, I will give you a grade of 100% on the assignment and grant approval to move forward with Project #5.** If your prospectus is incomplete or ineffective, I will ask you to “revise and resubmit.” You cannot begin work on Project #5 until I approve your prospectus, so any time spent revising and resubmitting your prospectus will take time away from your work on your film.

## **Project #5: Digital Documentary Film**

Once I have approved your team’s prospectus, you can begin your work on Project #5 in earnest. Because each team’s film will address a unique subject and tell its story using filmmaking techniques suited to that subject, the guidelines for this assignment are intentionally broad:

- Your finished film should be 5–8 minutes long. This may not seem like very much time to tell your story, but trust me, it will feel *much* longer when you are fine-tuning the sequence of your video clips and integrating audio throughout your film. Remember that you will have about a 10:1 ratio between raw and edited footage and that the final cut of your film will have to be highly polished.
- Your team may choose to take one of several “stances” in your film; for example, you might become academic investigators of a historical event, objective reporters of a current controversy, passionate advocates of a particular position, or narrators of fascinating story. Your stance will be determined, in part, by the subject you select for your film, but your team should consciously decide which type of documentarians you want to be.
- Your film should incorporate a variety of sources, such as human participants interviewed on camera, historical artifacts related to your subject, footage of public events as they happen, still photographs, and audio clips. There is no set number of required sources, but your film should show clear evidence that you have conducted significant research on the subject of your documentary.
- You may narrate your film using a voice-over track recorded by one of your team members, audio tracks extracted from interviews you conducted, on-screen text, or some combination of these techniques. Whatever method you choose, your film should have a clear narrative arc. It should have an identifiable beginning, middle, and end. Determining “what goes where and what the “story of the evidence” is will be crucial. Again, this is a crafted film, not a mere assemblage of raw footage.
- Your team must agree to and abide by the “Pledge of Documentary Ethics and Team Cooperation” stated in the Project #4 template. These mandatory guidelines exist to protect you as novice documentarians and to ensure that your work reflects well on the university and this course.

You should treat these broad guidelines as a starting point, not a definitive list of project requirements. I will meet frequently with your team to make sure that your project stays on track, and I encourage you to come to me with any questions you have along the way.

**Your finished documentary film is due at our final, on Monday, May 9.** You should submit your film on a CD/DVD as an exported, playable file in a common format (.mov, .mpeg, .mp4, .avi, .wmv). **Please confirm that your exported file is viewable on other computers before you submit it.** In addition, you should submit a second CD/DVD containing your team's project files from Final Cut Pro, iMovie, Windows Movie Maker, or whatever software you have chosen to use. During our final, we will meet with the other 1302 Honors documentary studies class to screen all eight documentaries of both classes. That will, we hope, be a very enjoyable and interesting experience. You may also consider uploading your film to YouTube or another video sharing site.

The last component of this assignment, also due during our final, is an individual short memo (1–2 pages, single-spaced) that reflects on your work and the work of your teammates over the course of Projects #4 and #5. Your memo should describe the role(s) that each team member played and evaluate each team member's contribution to the team's work. In addition, you should address any challenges you encountered while working on these assignments, explain how you overcame them, and discuss what you might do differently if you had more time, better technical skills, or more experience with creating films. Finally, your memo should state whether you believe that all members of your team deserve the same grade on Project #5, or make an argument for differential grading.

## Evaluation Criteria for Project #5

All members of your team will receive the same base grade on the digital documentary film. However, I reserve the right to adjust individual grades up or down based on evidence of your individual work and your personal reflection essay. I will evaluate your project using the following criteria:

- **Significance.** Does the film address a subject of importance to students, faculty, or staff at St. Edward's University, or some group of people in the greater Austin area? (Does it have a real audience?)
- **Originality.** Does the film say something worthwhile, new, or original about its subject? Does it have a unique "angle"? Is it a "fresh take"?
- **Evidence of Research.** Does the film include a variety of artifacts (documents, photographs, audio, video, etc.) from a variety of sources?
- **Arrangement.** Are the various components of the film arranged in a deliberate fashion, one that steadily advances the narrative arc of the film? Is there an identifiable beginning, middle, and end?
- **Filmmaking.** Does the film exhibit conscientious efforts to use the filmmaking principles we discussed in class (e.g., framing, lighting, a variety of shots)?
- **Editing.** Are the scenes in the film carefully edited together? Do the audio tracks (including background music) complement the video track?
- **Reflection.** Does the reflection essay show a mature, detailed analysis of your own work and your teammates' efforts? Does it honestly describe the successes and shortcomings of your film and the process you used to create it?
- **Correctness.** Does the reflection essay adhere to the conventions of standard written English (i.e., spelling, punctuation, grammar)?