



# documentary summary

dr. bonnie lenore kyburz

Summary writing is a vital rhetorical skill that may seem easy; write what you saw in the film. It gets tricky because what we see is shaped by our experience, history, ideological identifications, and more. We can't help infusing summaries with analytical language. A phrase like, "This amazing film" should seem fine, but "amazing" is a term that renders a judgement, and judgements indicate bias.

Writing summaries involves a good-faith effort at bracketing biases. Multiple drafting helps. Peer Review helps even more. Trustworthy summary writing requires extra vigilance regarding bias. To avoid using biased language in your documentary summary, here are some tips you should consider as required moves for this assignment:

1. **Set the scene.** Before launching into your summary, list ALL THE FACTS: Title, genre, director(s), year, and the main events that the documentary *chronicles*. Other useful verbs to use in attributive phrases include: reveals, portrays, highlights, focuses upon, follows, examines, explains, informs, re-enacts, etc. Using **higher-level verbs** in attribution elevates your writing and allows you to be more precise at describing the action of a scene.

**Example:** "Director Gabriela Copperthwaite's 2013 documentary *Blackfish* begins with audio from a 911 call from Seaworld. The oceanic park contacted authorities regarding the mauling death of Seaworld's top killer whale trainer, Dawn Brancheau."

2. **Write using a chronological timeline** (beginning, middle, end, or "b/m/e"). Map out key events that take place in the film. Place them on a timeline, and then use your rough map to help you create paragraphs that will explain the documentary's structure and the information it presents.

**Example:** "Next, the film cuts to footage from a historical boating run to capture orcas in the wild" (*Blackfish*).

3. **Describe action enacted by “the film,” or “the scene” as a way of describing what the film does.** Some students are inclined to talk about what the Director does, but to discuss directorial choices would be analytic. Summaries don’t overtly analyze. So, to keep the summary focused on what happens, give credit to “the film” or “the scene” in describing action. Use this structure to describe what “the film shows” (or “explores,” “examines,” “follows,” etc.). If you decide to feature key dialogue, give agency to those speakers as necessary.

**Example:** “John, a former Seaworld trainer, tells the story of when a baby orca was separated from her mother. He says, ‘It was awful’” (*Blackfish*).

4. **Provide transitions that make sense and advance the narrative** (between paragraphs). If you simply write, “Next,” that’s a bit weak (though you may use it once or twice). Instead, you might reflect upon the actions just described in the paragraph you’re leaving, and then forecast where those ideas or that action is headed.

**Example transition as topic sentence:** “Just as former trainers are upset about these actions, so too are members of the public media. As CNN reporter John Smith explains “[quote from Smith]” (*Blackfish*).

3. **Avoid using terms that refer to “we, as viewers” or what “the filmmakers intend,”** to the extent possible. We’re not analyzing directorial choices, and we’re not analyzing in what “we” see because we can’t assume “we” all view films in the same ways. So, instead of referencing the director (example: “Bar Lev next shows us how Marla paints her abstract works”), describe what the film shows (example: “The film features footage of Marla painting”).

4. **Use genre conventions to set up descriptions of what the film does and how.** Some common documentary elements that help set up summary description (and thereby organize your writing and describe HOW the film does what it does) include:

- 📺 Animation
- 📺 Archival footage
- 📺 Flashbacks
- 📺 Graphics
- 📺 Interviews
- 📺 Newspaper clippings & Newsreels
- 📺 Re-enactments
- 📺 Voiceover narration

**Use these structural terms to set up your description of a scene, shot, or event featured in the film.**

When you simply indicate something a director did, you invite us to imagine a kind of intimacy that summary doesn't invite. Similarly, when you reference "us," you suggest that each of us sees the purpose of a scene in the same way, when we cannot know how another views a scene. Instead, your summary is about the documentary. You are summarizing its information and its structure, not identifying directorial choices or audience reception. So, revised, the scene about Marla might read, "The film highlights Marla's painting process. She places her paints to the side of the canvas, and selects her colors, and then she brushes them onto the canvas." Do you notice how this sentence "sets up" by a frame that recognizes that we are simply summarizing what the film shows? Notice also that once you "set up," you are free to simply describe the action using **present tense verbs** (every time the film plays, Marla is painting — present tense). Use these frames as your forms of attribution, and use them often, to keep us focused. So, "The film begins with a shot of Marla ...", and "Later, the film reveals that Marla's paintings are in dispute. A *60 Minutes* crew arrives to document her process, and when it airs, people begin to doubt the authenticity of her work."

5. I want to repeat this major point as a separate instruction (it's important!). Just as you avoid referencing filmmaker moves, **avoid phrases like, "we, as viewers," or "we see," or "we learn,"** etc. Again, YOU are the only one who sees as you do. And the focus isn't about YOU but about WHAT THE FILM DOES. Maybe you are accustomed to using these phrases to get the draft down. Go for it, but be sure to *edit them out as we approach the due date*. Peer Review will help you with this. I also invite you to use the "find and replace" function to discover where you might have used "we" or "us" or "viewers," and then you can make some gymnastic moves to rearrange the sentence.
6. Don't write a "review-y" conclusion. *Just end where it ends.*

**Example:** "The final scene features shots of the trainers as they revisit the ocean and view orcas at play" (Blackfish).

7. Since you are citing only one source and any and all text in your summary is directly summarized, paraphrased, or quoted text, *you need only include one citation, just prior to the final period of the summary.* The citation should cite by the film's title. See MLA on [the reasoning behind this choice](#). Scroll down the page until you see the info on CITING A FILM. Though you need only that one, final citation, placing an in-text citation following direct quotes is a good habit to get into. See MLA for details. Also, be sure to provide a Works Cited page.