



Syracuse University Project Advance

Six Tasks: A Summer Reading & Viewing Assignment

Public education does not serve a public. It creates a public. And in creating the right kind of public, the schools contribute toward strengthening the spiritual basis of the American Creed. ...The question is, What kind of public does it create? A conglomerate of self-indulgent consumers? Angry, soulless, directionless masses? Indifferent, confused citizens? Or a public imbued with confidence, a sense of purpose, a respect for learning, and tolerance? The answer to this question has nothing whatever to do with computers, with testing, with teacher accountability, with class size, and with the other details of managing schools. The right answer depends on two things, and two things alone: the existence of shared narratives and the capacity of such narratives to provide an inspired reason for schooling.

—Neil Postman, *The End of Education*

“Americans rely on their schools,” [Neil] Postman wrote in his 1995 book, *The End of Education*, “to express their vision of who they are, which is why they are usually arguing over what happens in school.” In his 1989 *Atlantic* article, he avoids outlining his vision: “I am not wise enough to say where the young can find what they need.” Instead, he reminds his readers why, confronted with an unrelenting flow of information, they need a vision—some kind of narrative, a way to reach into the rapids, sift through the dregs, and give meaning to what remains.

—Will Gordon, “Do Students Need Facts or Stories?”

The really important issues of this world are ultimately decided by the story that grabs the most attention and is repeated most often.

—Annette Simmons, *Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins*

Let’s begin with a thought experiment. Imagine you’re visiting Disney World. You arrive and see a tea cup ride: freakishly large cups, people spinning inside them. Their expressions. A child gets sick. You notice the weather—very hot. A family next to you comforts a crying toddler. You’ve saved up for this. It’s magical, people say when you tell them about the trip. You notice food—carnival style—big sodas, funnel cake, meat on sticks. Actors in colorful costumes pantomime the movements of mutant animals. The hot sun. A memory: *The Little Mermaid* in second grade. Sweat on your collar. Eyes, people everywhere. The constant obligation to enjoy it all, a tyranny. The emptiness, and the attempts to fill that emptiness. More costumes. A game: feats of strength to win a prize. A roller coaster with pirates. The ride looks like a movie set. You buy a shirt with a picture of the ride on it, a souvenir. Others will be impressed, you think. You hope, anyway.

A week later, a friend asks, “How was your trip?” You respond by telling a story. There’s a beginning, a middle, and an end. The climax of the story is when your friend met Minnie Mouse. There’s a lesson in the story too: *hard work equals success*. Your friend asks, “Would you go back?” Sure, you say. And you feel content, excited, and whole.

This difference between *living* an experience and *narrating* it is at the heart of this assignment. Storytelling allows us to take the chaos and subjectivity of life and translate it into a form that others can recognize and understand. But this process isn’t simple, and the translation usually includes a cost. Something gets selected, something gets left out, and the shape of the story quietly shapes what we believe.

This summer, we’ll follow this idea of living and storytelling across six steps. We begin with the building blocks: what stories do to us, and why we’re so susceptible to them (Steps 1–2). From there, we zoom out to ask how the

medium of a story (e.g. oral, written, visual) changes what it can do and who it can reach (Steps 2–3). Then we focus on a specific and powerful contemporary storytelling form: the documentary film (Steps 4–5). And finally, in Step 6, we put all of these ideas to work together on a single film, practicing the kind of thinking we'll do every week in WRT105, our first semester course.

Along the way, you'll read and listen to thinkers who have spent careers on these questions: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on the danger of reductive narratives, Peter Brooks on our deep hunger for story, Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman on how media rewires thought, and Patricia Aufderheide on what documentary filmmakers promise their audiences and what they owe them.

The questions running through all six steps are these:

- How does narrative structure help us feel whole — and what do we lose in that process?
- How does technology reshape the stories we tell and the way we receive them?
- What happens to a story when it moves into a new medium, like documentary film?
- What responsibilities do storytellers carry when they claim to represent reality?

Your task is to complete the readings and viewing, reflect deeply on what you've encountered, and respond to each reflection prompt. You'll come away with tools to think critically about documentary filmmaking and storytelling, tools you'll apply as you create your own mini-documentary project when we return in the fall.

Be sure to **complete the assignment before we meet in late August.**

A Few Items Before We Begin

- The strongest responses for this assignment aren't the ones that get everything "right." They'll be the ones that explore the answers to questions we might not be entirely certain about at this early stage in the course. Feel free to stretch, experiment, and propose new ideas even if you're not entirely certain of their merits.
- **On Academic Honesty** - under no circumstances should you use AI tools, such as Claude, ChatGPT, Gemini, or other automated LLM writing generators, to complete *any* portion of this assignment. All responses must be your own original thoughts and reflections. Using AI will be considered a violation of Syracuse University's academic honesty policies and will result in no credit for the assignment and no opportunity to resubmit.
 - Please note: the purpose of this assignment is to engage with the material as a fully-embodied human being with thoughts, feelings, and emotions. The expectation is *not* that these written responses will be perfect, polished pieces! Keep it human, keep it real, and keep the integrity of your work at the center of your thinking & writing. You'll be fine.
 - **Your work for this assignment must be compiled in a single Google Doc.** Begin by opening a new document where you'll label each section clearly with the task number or title. As you work through each reading, video, and reflection, continue adding to the same document. Please do not create separate documents and paste them together at the end—**submissions that don't follow this format will not be accepted.**
- Our first-semester course, **WRT 105: Academic Writing Workshop**, is an intensive college writing course. Before we dive into the many forms that a story can take, we'll begin by exploring how storytelling *works*, both in terms of the **narratives that authors and filmmakers construct** and in terms of the

technological, cultural, and ethical forces that shape how stories are told and received.

- This conversation will take us through ideas from the early 20th century to today. We'll examine how new media technologies like digital video, social media, and streaming platforms transform not just the way we *tell* stories, but also how we *experience* them as audiences. Along the way, we'll consider how these evolving forms of storytelling shape our understanding of the world, particularly when it comes to narratives about **race, social class, and gender**.
- Completing this summer assignment represents **all of the daily homework tasks scheduled for the first three weeks of our course!** By doing this work now, you'll be freed up to focus on other important tasks, like college essays and applications, during the first month of school.
- At the end of the first unit, you'll take what you've learned from these readings and reflections to create your own informational storytelling project—an Op-Doc-style mini-documentary. You'll apply the theories and ideas we've encountered (especially around **narrative, genre, technology, and representation**) to create a project that critically engages with both form and content.
 - Students will receive detailed instructions for the project in the fall, but keep it in mind as you complete this summer assignment. The more thoughtfully you engage with these materials now, the stronger your creative project will be later on.

The Six Tasks

Task 1 — The Power of Stories

Texts: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "[The Danger of a Single Story](#)" (TED Talk) and Peter Brooks, *Seduced by Story: The Use and Abuse of Narrative*, [Chapter 1](#)

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian-born writer whose TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," has become one of the most watched in TED's history. (Students who took Eng11H may already be familiar. If so, congratulations!) In it, she discusses the power of stories and the ways they shaped her own perspectives on class, status, and identity growing up. This is a warm and accessible entry point into questions we'll spend the whole semester pursuing.

Peter Brooks is a literary theorist whose recent book *Seduced by Story: The Use and Abuse of Narrative* investigates the human desire to tell and receive stories. He examines how narrative has become a dominant force in contemporary culture, influencing everything from politics to personal identity to the legal system. Like Adichie, Brooks is interested in what stories do to us, often without our awareness.

Please note: Brooks references many authors and texts you may not recognize. Don't get discouraged! You don't need to know those references to understand his main ideas. Skim what you don't recognize, and focus on his argument. We'll fill in the gaps when we meet in the fall.

The Assignment:

Part A — Adichie: Watch the TED Talk and write a focused summary of her argument (~150 words) that includes her central claim and the various pieces of evidence she uses as support (e.g. personal stories, statistics, examples from literature, etc.). Then identify one "single story" you have personally encountered or adopted about a place, a group of people, or even yourself, and briefly describe it.

Part B — Brooks, Ch. 1: Brooks argues that narrative has become so dominant in contemporary culture that we often don't notice it operating on us. Make a list of the four most important quotes from this chapter (with pg #s) that work to support this claim. Then explain them in a single paragraph (~150 words), noting the degree to which Brooks' argument is convincing to you.

Part C — Brooks, Ch. 1: Reflect on a specific experience or recent event where you noticed information being turned into a story, in the news, in politics, in advertising, or in your own life. How did that narrative shape your perception or response? What might this tell us about the power of information packaged in story form? (~150 words)

Task 2 — How Media Changes Our Thinking

Texts: Marshall McLuhan, "[This is Marshall McLuhan: The Medium is the Massage](#)" (1967, first ~25 minutes) and Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, [Introduction and Chapter 1](#)

Marshall McLuhan was a media theorist who served as head of the Centre for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto through much of the 1960s and '70s. He was a genuine celebrity in his day, and phrases like "the medium is the message" and "the global village" have entered everyday language. Neil Postman, a professor of media studies at NYU for over 40 years, built directly on McLuhan's ideas in his 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, though, as you'll see, he arrives at considerably more pessimistic conclusions.

As you read and watch, keep a running list of claims each author makes about *you*, the contemporary media consumer. Framing his thinking this way will make his ideas that sometimes seem historical feel personally relevant instead.

The Assignment:

Part A: Imagine that these two texts are lenses in a pair of glasses. When the viewer looks through the lenses, the world looks different. To make these glasses (think of this as a kind of interpretive theoretical cheat sheet) select **at least three passages** from both texts (the video *and* the chapter). Then, in a thorough paragraph (~150 words) explain how one might use these quotes to interpret a contemporary visual text (music video, tiktok, youtube short, TV commercial, etc.).

Part B: In a separate paragraph (~150 words), synthesize the two sources. Where do McLuhan and Postman agree? Where do they diverge? (Hint: McLuhan tends to be curious and neutral about media change; Postman is deeply worried. That tension is worth exploring.)

Task 3 — The Return of Orality

Text: Derek Thompson - "[The Orality of Everything](#)" (*The Atlantic*)

This recent interview takes up a question that connects everything you've read so far: if McLuhan and Postman are right that media shapes thought, what does it mean that so much of contemporary culture is returning to oral and visual forms (e.g. podcasts, video essays, documentary shorts, TikToks)? Something that seemed to be fading is coming back in new shapes.

The Assignment:

Read the interview and write the following

- A brief description of literacy versus orality. What characteristics define these different eras? Write your response in plain language for an audience not in our class.
- The authors reference McLuhan several times. How does his thinking fit into this theory of shifting orality (or post-literacy as they later call it)?
- Where are the moments we most disagree with? These are two old guys talking about social media trends. Do they get anything wrong here? If so, what?
- What do we gain in the shift toward this new era? What do we lose? Locate three specific moments in the conversation to cite as support for your answer and provide page # citations for each.

Task 4 — What is Documentary?

Text: Patricia Aufderheide, *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction*, [Chapter 1](#) (p.1-53, stop at "Founders" section)

Patricia Aufderheide is a film scholar whose work on documentary is widely taught in university film courses. Her opening chapter introduces the foundational ideas and tensions that shape the genre of documentary film: What is a film that belongs to this genre? How might it be hard to pin down? What ethical responsibilities must a filmmaker take on when claiming to represent reality? How does trust between filmmaker and audience get established? How might it be broken?

The Assignment:

Part A — Concept Map: Rather than pulling isolated quotes, create a concept map (a visual diagram) that links Aufderheide's major ideas from this chapter. Include key concepts like the definition of documentary, the tensions in its production, the role of the filmmaker, trust and credibility, and ethical considerations—plus any other element you find important. Use arrows and connecting lines to show how these ideas relate to or build on one another. (FYI, drawing this by hand and including a photo in your document is A-Ok.)

Part B — Short Response (~150 words): Looking at your concept map, write a brief reflection: which of Aufderheide's ideas do you find most surprising, most debatable, or most useful for thinking about documentaries you've already seen? (FYI, this is informal; feel free simply to get your thoughts down on the page.)

Task 5 — Documentary as Argument

Texts: Selection of *New York Times* OpDocs (list below) and one *New Yorker* documentary short

Now that you have Aufderheide's framework in your pocket, it's time to examine how her ideas operate in actual films. *The New York Times'* OpDocs series is a good place to start. Remember that OpDocs get their name from newspaper “op-eds,” short for opinion-editorial, which are typically brief opinionated essays that appear in a newspaper’s opinion section and address an important issue of the day. Opdocs work like op-eds except they’re in video form, meaning the filmmakers take a deliberate position and use the tools of *cinema* to build an argument. They are *not* neutral or objective and that's precisely what makes them interesting. Learning to see how they work will be essential to both your analytical writing and your own documentary project when we return in the fall.

The Assignment:

Part A — Watching for Conventions: Watch at least **three** of the following OpDocs, paying close attention to the features they share (e.g. narrative structure, text on screen, expert testimony, editing moves, music, sound effects, what is shown v. concealed, etc.): “[Lullaby](#)”; “[Hotel 22](#)”; “[Dismantling Detroit](#)”; “[Bodies on the Border](#)”; “[VHS v Communism](#)”; “[Slo-Mo](#)”; “[Chinese on the Inside](#)”; and “[Rent-a-Foreigner](#).” As you watch, take notes on the elements that recur. Doing so is important work! You’re building a mental toolkit for the genre, and this will develop your understanding of the elements to incorporate in your own documentary project.

Part B — Close Analysis: Select **one** OpDoc from Part A to examine more carefully. Identify a moment or element and explain how it helps the film communicate its *argument* or position on its topic. Pay particular attention to narrative elements that work differently in this medium than they would in a newspaper article, short story, or TV broadcast. (~150 words per film)

Part C — Genre Assessment: Step back and write a brief assessment of the OpDoc as a genre (~150 words), drawing on at least one concept from Aufderheide (Step 4) and one idea from another text that appears in Steps 1–3. You’re practicing the move of using theory to see something more clearly, which is what we’ll do more extensively when we begin class.

Task 6 — Reflections and Applications

Text: “[Laughing in the Face of Disability: Tuesco](#)” (2022, 18 min, dir. Daniel Poler)

(CW: this short film features mature language)

We’ve read about the power of narrative, the way media shapes thinking, the return of oral and visual culture, and the specific conventions of documentary film. This final step asks you to bring those ideas together and put them to work on a single, carefully chosen film.

Watch “Laughing in the Face of Disability: Tuesco.” Then complete the following two tasks.

The Assignment:

Part A — The Lens: Choose any one concept from the theoretical readings in Steps 1–4 (e.g. McLuhan’s idea that the medium is the message, Brooks’ notion of narrative seduction, Adichie’s warning about the single story, or Aufderheide’s ethical concerns.) Use it as a lens to examine **one specific moment** in the Tuesco film: a scene, a structural choice, an absence, a sound effect. The goal here is to reveal something new in the film—something beyond what it “seems” to be about—that only becomes visible when we take into account another scholar’s thinking. (~200 words)

Part B — Representation: One of the first major essays we'll write in class asks us to think about representation—the presentation of a person, place, or idea, assembled to reflect the real thing. Documentary filmmaking is filled with them, and—as you can probably guess—the work is filled with all kinds of challenges, both for the representer (the filmmaker) and the represented (the subjects).

To get us started with this kind of thinking, consider commonly-told stories that represent people with disabilities. (If one doesn't immediately come to mind, ask yourself why that is. Or, perhaps you can refer back to reading *Of Mice and Men* in 9th grade.) Now respond to the question: what is noteworthy (e.g. interesting yet not obvious) about this short film's representation of disability? What might this representational work reveal to audiences about the film's subject(s), the filmmaker, and/or documentary film in general? (~200 words)

A note on the writing required here in Step 6: The writing here is informal and exploratory—you don't need to have a claim or carefully selected evidence to support. Instead, your task is to note what viewers and readers can't help but notice, to place those elements in conversation, and then to imagine—even if it's a stretch—what such a meeting of ideas helps us to see differently. Take a risk, write it down, and bring it to class!

Looking Ahead to October: Documentary Films

In our course's second unit (which we'll engage around early October) we will analyze documentary films. Below is a list of the titles you will be able to choose from. While it's **not a required component of the summer assignment**, consider spending some time this summer previewing some of the films in the list. That way you're not pressed in early October when the daily homework schedule picks up. You'll find many of these titles on streaming services, YouTube, or via the Internet Archive, but if you're interested in one and can't access it, email me and I might be able to provide you with a file.

Hint: our first essay assignment asks students to select a documentary to work with in a closely critical way. A small amount of research will help you to narrow the following list down to the titles you are most interested in screening. The best way to do this is to read the film summaries available at imdb.com, allmovie.com, and, especially, Wikipedia.org. To get a sense of the visual style of a given film, feel free to watch trailers, almost all of which are available on YouTube.

Narratives of Identity, Race, and Power

- *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016) – Raoul Peck's powerful film essay on James Baldwin's unfinished manuscript.
- *13th* (2016) – Ava DuVernay's deep dive into race, mass incarceration, and the justice system in America.
- *Paris is Burning* (1990) – A look at New York City's drag ball culture, race, class, and gender.
- *Welcome to Chechnya* (2020) – A chilling investigation into LGBTQ+ persecution in Chechnya, blending investigative journalism and technological innovation.
- *Time* (2020) – Garrett Bradley's poetic story of a family's struggle with incarceration.

Storytelling, Memory, and Truth

- *Cameraperson* (2016) – Kirsten Johnson's meditation on the ethics and choices of documentary filmmaking.
- *The Act of Killing* (2012) – Joshua Oppenheimer's hybrid documentary, where perpetrators of mass killings re-enact their crimes.
- *Finding Vivian Maier* (2014) – The fascinating discovery of a hidden street photographer's life and work.

Media, Technology, and Representation

- *Citizen Four* (2014) – Laura Poitras’s real-time story of Edward Snowden’s revelations about NSA surveillance.
- *Navalny* (2022) – A gripping look at the Russian opposition leader and media manipulation.
- *Collective* (2019) – An exposé of corruption and cover-ups in Romania, following a deadly nightclub fire.
- *No No: A Dockumentary* (2014) – Examining race, rebellion, and media representation through Dock Ellis’s no-hitter.
- *Anvil—The Story of Anvil* (2008) – A heavy metal group struggles to reach fame decades after their prime.
- *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster* (2004) – A deep dive into the personal and public struggles of a mega rock band.

Community, Labor, and American Life

- *American Factory* (2019) – A look at a Chinese company’s factory in Ohio and cross-cultural labor tensions.
- *Roger & Me* (1989) – Michael Moore’s scathing portrayal of GM’s impact on Flint, Michigan.
- *Detropia* (2012) – A portrait of Detroit’s economic collapse and resilience.
- *Harlan County, USA* (1976) – Barbara Kopple’s classic study of a coal miners’ strike in Kentucky.
- *Waiting for Superman* (2010) – An investigation into the challenges facing public education in the U.S.
- *The Queen of Versailles* (2012) – A look at wealth, excess, and economic collapse through one family’s lens.

Observational and Poetic Documentaries

- *Grizzly Man* (2005) – Werner Herzog’s exploration of obsession, nature, and human-animal boundaries.
- *Faya Dayi* (2021) – A visually poetic meditation on khat farming and life in Ethiopia.
- *They Shall Not Grow Old* (2018) – Peter Jackson’s colorized restoration of WWI footage.
- *The Dog* (2013) – A character study of John Wojtowicz, the inspiration for Dog Day Afternoon.
- *Instrument* (1999) – An experimental portrait of the band Fugazi and its ethos.
- *I Am Trying to Break Your Heart* (2002) – A behind-the-scenes look at the band Wilco as they struggle to make their landmark album *Hotel Yankee Foxtrot*.

Subcultures and Alternative Communities

- *Trekkies* (1997) – A playful look at the world of Star Trek fandom.
- *Spellbound* (2002) – A tense and intimate portrayal of the National Spelling Bee.
- *Jesus Camp* (2006) – A controversial exploration of fundamentalist Christian youth camps.
- *Catfish* (2010) – A provocative look at online deception and digital relationships.
- *The Weather Underground* (2002) – An account of the rise and fall of the American radical far-left Communist organization Weather Underground.

Foundations and Historical Perspectives

- *Nanook of the North* (1922) – The original “documentary” film, though problematically constructed and staged.
- *Life Itself* (2014) – A tribute to film critic Roger Ebert’s life and legacy.

Some tips:

- If you end up watching a film, **jot down your thoughts about it**, especially with regard to the way the subject has been presented. Pay special attention to the way viewers are invited to understand the people and places that populate the film. In regard to the former, think in terms of indirect characterization – what a character’s actions, appearance, speech, thoughts, and others’ reactions reveal about them.
- Documentary films are very often a form of argument. Pay attention to the **different ways viewers could understand the film’s subject matter** and which reading seems to be favored.
- Regardless of whether ambiguities remain at the end of the film, documentaries are very consciously constructed. In other words, what we see as viewers is the result of many intentional choices on the part of the film’s creative team. Look out for the **ways a film creates points of tension** within scenes and how different portions of the film relate to each other.

Don’t feel as if you need to watch all of the films on our list, but try to get to at least a few. While this work is optional, the more you watch now, the easier time you’ll have choosing and working with a topic mid-semester.

Questions? Email john.duffy@berkleyschools.org.

This marks the start of an adventure! Enjoy this first leg of the journey!