

# Doing a Radio Documentary

*Fourth course, Fourth grading period, Weeks 4-9*

Doing a documentary is one demanding pinnacle to scale in the radio broadcasting trek. And like climbing Everest or K2 it takes thought, planning, a solid route and a sense of sure footing. It also takes ambition, skill, adventure and emotional commitment. The risks are great — well, obviously not life-threatening — but expect your students to get light-headed. They'll need a climbing buddy — in fact several — as they scale these production heights. They'll need time to camp and think. This lesson factors in those stops. The ultimate pinnacle they are striving for is the ability to dig into a topic with depth and insight and place that information in a broader context.



## Enduring Understanding

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Documentary production pulls together every skill the radio journalist must have: technical, intellectual, artistic and editorial. Documentaries come in myriad styles. Few people ever master them all and, in fact, many producers learn more and more each time they attempt these heights. The lessons learned and the challenges faced when really looking into a topic are well worth it.



## Essential Questions

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How do I select the best topic for documentary treatment? What kind of documentary style do I want to choose? What are the steps to do this kind of documentary?



## Objectives and Outcome

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- Students will analyze several documentaries in depth and be able to delineate their production approaches and explain the producer's method of gathering audio material.
- Students will develop reliable sources for different topics.
- Students will hone their abilities to conduct research and articulate their ideas.
- Students research, pitch and plan documentaries.
- Students will each produce a 12- to 20-minute documentary.
- Students will utilize all the skills they have learned in this four-course radio program including the setting of schedules to accommodate complex deadlines.



## Suggested Time

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Six weeks



## Resources and Materials

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Soundprint ([www.soundprint.org](http://www.soundprint.org))

Radio documentary tutorial ([www.cbc.ca/outfront/contribute/radio\\_doc\\_tutor.html](http://www.cbc.ca/outfront/contribute/radio_doc_tutor.html))

Eight pieces, all but one are excerpts of longer documentaries

“Features and Documentaries,” Writing for Television, Radio and New Media, pages 181-222

“Documentary and feature programmes,” Radio Production, pages 264-275



## Procedure

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Over the next six weeks, students will choose a documentary approach, find a topic and produce a documentary. Its length — recommended at 12 to 20 minutes — will be determined by the student and the teacher together.

Building on previous introduction to documentaries — two weeks

For the next two weeks students will be involved in intense listening sessions involving five documentaries. Teachers may choose to use the five documentaries we selected for classroom review and the accompanying “Talking Points” or select documentaries you prefer and prepare your own notes. It is a good idea to put all the documentaries that you will be using in class on separate CDs.

1. Divide students into groups and assign each group a different documentary approach to listen to. Teachers should review and select the pieces from “Talking Points” that is provided with this lesson or make their own choices. For this lesson, we have selected five documentaries produced by Soundprint Media Center ([www.soundprint.org](http://www.soundprint.org)) and provided brief notes about each.

Note: None of these documentaries are news pieces. This is intentional. These documentaries were selected for the differences in their stylistic approach. You may, however, want to discuss how a documentary can add more understanding to the news and, if any of these documentaries could have been newswier, how students might have approached it. Or, if you prefer to emphasize documentaries that are newsworthy, you may want to select documentaries that better suit the exploration of a news topic in depth. Another alternative would be to use the selected stylistic approaches in classroom discussions and assign the news documentaries on the RTNDA Web site ([www.rtna.org](http://www.rtna.org)) that are regional and national award winners as listening homework.

2. Each group spends one class period listening to the documentary it has been assigned and taking notes. Students should listen for the documentarian’s approach, how the producer moved the story forward and how new information was introduced. They should consider the interplay between a personal story and informational sections, transitions, ambience and the organizational structure.

Students can use as a guide the handouts and skills they learned when analyzing the walking tours they reviewed in the third term. Students should take notes to present their thoughts to the class. Students will choose a five-minute example of the documentary they heard and play that for the rest of the class and discuss the documentary’s structure and approach.

Note: There is no student activity sheet for this exercise. Students are to work independently to conceptualize their oral and written presentation on the documentary they have been assigned to listen to and analyze.

3. After the initial introduction, the class as a whole will review these five documentaries in more detail. For five class periods, you will be analyzing one documentary approach per period. At the beginning of the class, distribute the appropriate “Talking Points.” The class will listen to the entire documentary, discuss the points and summarize the approach. Has the class discovered additional points? What other observations to make? Be sure each day they distinguish characteristics and stylistic approaches.

If there is time in your class period, you may share other documentaries that use the same approach or assign them as homework. For example, one day, focus on the diary approach.

Your goal, whether you use the five choices we have provided or others, is to get students to think critically about audio styles, process, order and the ways to plan a documentary — the structure, different kinds of tape (emotional, subjective, objective) the writing style and use of sound. Each student will be choosing some of these styles to produce his or her own documentary. You want students to be familiar with the tools they can choose as they begin planning to execute their work.

### **Week three**

4. Students choose the approach they wish to emulate in consultation with the teacher. They must research and pitch their topic to the teacher and write a focus statement. Students should come prepared to be concise, specific and be able to present a focused pitch. They begin to prepare a list of potential interviewees. Expect the end of the week to be very busy with student meetings. All students must be ready to move ahead with their topics and interviews by the end of the week.

They will be producing a 12- to 20-minute documentary. Allow flexibility; the length may be determined by the topic and/or as their research, interviews and work progresses.

Anyone having serious trouble conceiving his or her project in understandable detail should choose from a list of topics prepared by the teacher. Preferably this topic will be one that can be accomplished on school grounds so that the student can check in more regularly for guidance.

Note: Some students, even advanced students, may need this kind of help. That’s OK. They may be the people who make great radio newscasters, advertisers, promo producers or engineers. Students who are not adept at writing should choose an approach that plays to their strength; for example, an audio diary does not require as much scripting. This may be the only time they attempt an in-depth audio project like this. They should and will succeed with hands-on guidance.

### **Weeks four and five**

5. Students work on their documentaries. Post a schedule and have students sign up with you to check in regularly. You may want to take a day a week to have each student discuss where he is in the process of production. Give attention to individual issues as they arise.

As these weeks progress, teachers should see students editing their audio, working on drafts of scripts and completing portions of the whole that can be played for comprehension and development of their chosen approach. At this point, teachers should be listening to what their students are producing. Teachers should be playing the role of editors, making suggestions and sending students back to work some more and to refine what they are doing. This is done professionally.

Leaving students to their own devices on such a large project is not advised. Every student should be checking in regularly and have met with the teacher for a brief conference by the end of the week. If at all possible, 20 to 30 minutes a week with each student is needed. Rigorously edit what they are doing — listen to their scripts and audio, consider the documentary’s order, word choice and focus. Teachers are not doing the actual workstation edits; they are editing for content. Get students to stretch, dig deeper and make more interesting, listenable and entertaining choices. Push them to tell good stories, compelling stories and take chances in their productions. Their pieces should not drag; they should move along. They should be in-depth, but not wordy.

### **Week six**

6. Documentaries will range between 12 and 20 minutes as determined with the teacher. Students finish their documentaries by recording and mixing their pieces. They should burn the piece onto a CD, provide a complete transcript of the entire documentary, no matter its length, and provide a 20-second introduction to their piece that an announcer could read.

### **The last week of class**

7. Presentation of all documentaries to the class.



### **Homework**

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During the first two weeks of this lesson, students may be asked to listen to and review documentaries off the Web or on CD.

It is assumed that students will be working outside of class to complete this assignment. This will include research, preparation for and the taping of interviews, script writing as needed, marking the script and practicing a taped read. This may also involve engineering and mixing as necessary.



### **Assessment**

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Students may be evaluated on:

- Participation in class
- Analysis of documentary approaches
- Conception of own documentary
- Cooperation with the discussion and editing process
- Growth as the project proceeds
- The final documentary project

Teachers are provided “Radio Broadcast IV, End-of-Year Project: Produce a Radio Documentary.” As usual, the lower half provides teachers with some guidelines for grading. The upper portion of the rubric has been left blank for students to write their own scoring guide.



### **Academic Content Standards**

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Understands how different media (e.g., documentaries, current affairs programs, Web pages) are structured to present a particular subject or point of view (McREL Language Arts, Standard 10, Benchmark 2, Level IV, grades 9-12)

Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes. (Standard 4, NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts)

Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes. (Standard 5, NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts)

The logo consists of the word "PRO" in a bold, yellow, sans-serif font, positioned inside a dark grey circle. A thin yellow horizontal line is drawn beneath the letters "P" and "R".

## Industry Standards and Expectations

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The challenge to the broadcaster often is to determine how suitably to present the complexities of human behavior without compromising or reducing the range of subject matter, artistic expression or dramatic presentation desired by the broadcaster and its audience. For television and for radio, this requires exceptional awareness of considerations peculiar to each medium and of the composition and preferences of particular communities and audiences. (“Responsibly exercised artistic freedom,” Statement of Principles of Radio and Television Broadcasters issue by The Board of Directors of the National Association of Broadcasters)

Identify ethical responsibilities and how they relate to the degree of influence the media have on individuals. (Performance Element, Pathway KS Statement: Exhibit knowledge of ethics and legal issues related to journalism and broadcasting, States’ Career Clusters, National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium)

# Talking Points

## Young People Against Heavy Metal T-Shirts

([http://soundprint.org/radio/display\\_show/ID/171/name/Young+People+Against+Heavy+Metal+T-shirts](http://soundprint.org/radio/display_show/ID/171/name/Young+People+Against+Heavy+Metal+T-shirts))

Very artistic and impressionistic; very artistic; listen first to see if you think this is appropriate for your classroom. *Length: Approximately 29 minutes.*

### Talking Points

- Note: The intro gives the impression that this is related to news and then takes a turn that this, in fact, is a prank. Does this explain the piece?
- Note mix of sound, sound bites, many voices as a collage
- Language (“bastard”) in the first track. The narrator’s tone that gets listeners involved and presumes they might be lost in what is happening; so an explanation is necessary.
- Discuss what this piece is about, its artistic nature, its heavy reliance on writing and sound. This is a personal perspective as a way into the topic. It deals with youth culture and the language of band culture.
- Note the technique of processing the tracks for effect (the reading of the paper segment)
- It’s at least eight minutes before listeners begin to move into the sequence that dramatizes what “happened” when this hoax was started.
- Discuss the structure of how this piece unfolds. You may want students to outline the entire piece and discuss how it was set up and its flow. Why do you think the producer chose to tell the story this way?
- Is this piece of value? Why or why not?

## America's Journey

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([http://soundprint.org/radio/display\\_show/ID/203/name/America%27s+Journey](http://soundprint.org/radio/display_show/ID/203/name/America%27s+Journey))

The emotional voyage of Americans since 9/11. *Length: Approximately 29 minutes.*

### Talking Points

- Note intro news peg (the anniversary of 9/11). There is a clear statement of what this documentary is about. There is the thread that one person's experience can relate to a collective whole.
- Note the use of multiple voices on one emotional topic.
- Why is this piece more than a glorified vox pop? (It digs deeper.)
- The person identifies himself and starts remembering. (There is no writing here – no tracks) Note sound at top of the memory. Did it have to be from that day?
- His memories are descriptive, so descriptive you think you see what is happening.
- How does the producer use sound in between the memories?
- How do the memories differ from each other?
- This is followed with dead air. Why? Why is it so effective?
- The next person breaks the pattern by not giving his name first. (In fact, there is no ID at all.)
- Note the comparison to another bombing, a somewhat similar situation for one survivor of the Oklahoma bombing.
- Discuss the choice of tape order selected by the producer. You may want to outline the entire piece and discuss how it was set up.
- Is this piece of value? Why or why not?
- How did the artistic choices the producer made help to get across big ideas?
- What were those big ideas?
- Were you emotionally moved by this piece? Which parts of it?

## Every Tree Tells a Story

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([http://soundprint.org/radio/display\\_show/ID/692/name/Every+Tree+Tells+A+Story](http://soundprint.org/radio/display_show/ID/692/name/Every+Tree+Tells+A+Story))

The cultural reactions to city parks. Report tracks, interviews, and very artistic in its approach to a cultural topic. *Length: Approximately 29 minutes.*

### Talking Points

- Note the use of ambient sound at the top of the piece.
- How does the straightforwardness of the information in the report contrast with the expressiveness of what people are saying about trees?
- How does the reporter benefit by the resources that an international city like London provides? London's international community of people can compare London's parks with the parks "back home" in diverse parts of the globe.
- Are you engaged by this person's story?
- How does the reporter use sound to connect the segments of ideas?
- How does the reporter use experts – like the park expert – to connect ideas?
- What research do you think the reporter had to do first? Which interviews?
- What are some of the questions the reporter asked?
- What is the focus of this piece? The themes? One is the welcoming nature of parks for immigrants and why this is important.
- Do you live in an area where parks are valued? Who uses them?
- How is the information in this piece juxtaposed with information about culture? With memories? What nationalities are represented in this documentary?
- How did the artistic choices the producer made help to get across big ideas?
- What were those big ideas?
- Were you emotionally moved by their piece? Which parts of it?



## My So-Called Lungs

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([http://soundprint.org/radio/display\\_show/ID/221/name/My+So+Called+Lungs](http://soundprint.org/radio/display_show/ID/221/name/My+So+Called+Lungs))

An audio diary; a first-person account of illness. Recorded as a diary by the patient and then put together in a compelling way by the producer. *Length: Approximately 29 minutes.*

### Talking Points

- This is an audio diary. If the student selects this documentary to emulate, you will want to look up more information about the work of this producer, Joe Richmond. He is the creator of Teenage Diaries. His Web site is very extensive and a lot has been written about how Joe goes about his work as a documentary producer. Discuss other topics he has covered.
- Why was Laura a good person to choose to record her own story? (Her descriptive ability; the fact she is considering a lung transplant adds drama and momentum to her story.)
- What stories would you consider telling in a progressively linear way using this audio diary method?
- Note sound of hospital equipment and the patient's ID as to where she is. She has been instructed by the producer to record where she is and vividly describe what is happening.
- If you listen carefully, you can probably decide which parts were culled from Laura's diary and which parts were scripted and recorded later.
- How does the producer set the scene emotionally before you begin to understand the extent of her illness?
- Can you make a list of the things that Laura may have been asked to think about as she kept her diary?
- What cues does the patient give that she is signing off and changing days in her recordings?
- Interviewing the father was very effective. How did the patient respect her dad in the interview and still get his reaction effectively on tape?
- Why was information interspersed throughout the piece and not lumped together?
- How does the piece build in intensity? Does it give the listener a chance to emotionally rest? Is there a shape to how the story unfolds and we get to know Laura?
- Why does the piece step away from her illness a bit?
- What will you remember from this piece?
- What role does music play in this piece?
- You may want to outline the entire piece and discuss how it was set up.
- Is this piece of value? Are there any questions you wish Laura had focused on?
- Did Laura focus on her illness too much after she said she didn't want to be remembered only for it? How would you as the producer respected her wishes and pushed her to consider this, too?

## After Graduation: Meeting Special Needs

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([http://soundprint.org/radio/display\\_show/ID/586/name/After+Graduation%3A+Meeting+Special+Needs](http://soundprint.org/radio/display_show/ID/586/name/After+Graduation%3A+Meeting+Special+Needs))

A more traditional style with tracks, acts and sound. Explores options for children with learning disabilities after high school at Montgomery College and a technical high school in Baltimore. *Length: Approximately 29 minutes.*

### Talking Points

- How does the intro try to relate the issue to the listener’s frame of reference? Does it work? Could you do better?
- How does the reporter pull you in with a personal story?
- This is a piece about kids graduating. Why did the reporter choose to lead off with a 45-year-old man? What role did he play emotionally, and intellectually in the shape of this documentary? How did this man relate to a place in the story that is relevant to the main topic?
- What scenes did the reporter need to make the story work in each location?
- What roles did the students, the experts, the scenes play in the overall shape of the documentary? Were they informational, emotional, and/or emotive?
- How much is the narration vital to this documentary? In what ways? Why?
- You may want students to outline the entire piece and discuss how it was set up.
- How did the producer use ambience and scenes to move the topic forward?
- Is this piece of value? Why or why not?
- What ways would you be able to cover this topic differently in another documentary style?

# Produce a Radio Documentary

You are to produce a 12- to 20-minute documentary.

**Product**

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**Topic**

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**Approach**

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**Structure**

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**Writing**

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**Voicing**

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**Editing**

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**Production**

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**The Feedback Process**

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## Guidelines for the End-of-Term Project

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<b>Topic</b>	The topic is well chosen, researched and explored in depth.
<b>Style</b>	The student has an original style that is appropriate for the subject, focus and theme.
<b>Structure</b>	The documentary has a clear progression of ideas and a beginning, middle and end.
<b>Writing</b>	The writing is clear, descriptive, and leads to tape effectively. <i>(Note: Some documentaries might not have scripts.)</i>
<b>Actuality</b>	All actualities, music, and ambience are used effectively in clear, interesting, and compelling ways.
<b>Voicing</b>	All recorded voice tracks are clear, written and delivered for the ear, and engaging.
<b>Editing</b>	All edits are smooth.

<b>Audio</b>	The mixes are smooth, at unity, and well conceived.
<b>Feedback</b>	The student responded openly to the feedback and made judicious edits.
<b>Overall</b>	<p>This documentary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Covers the topic effectively</li><li>• Is factual, non-fiction and balanced in its reporting</li><li>• Focuses on one issue</li><li>• Tells a good story, informs and/or investigates an issue effectively</li><li>• Holds attention throughout</li><li>• Flows smoothly technically</li></ul>