

**SUL ROSS STATE UNIVERSITY
COMM 5304 / THEA 5304 VIDEO WORKSHOP
DOCUMENTARY FILM PRODUCTION**

Summer I 2026
Monday through Friday
11am – 1pm
Motion Capture Lab

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Office Hours: by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This class is a production workshop in the art of Documentary Filmmaking. Documentaries are unique in the world of film in that the form is wide open, and most often dictated by the discoveries made by the filmmakers in the *process* of making the film. The topics, themes, construction, and resulting films are as varied as the breadth and depth of human experience. Where fiction films are written, planned, and then executed, Documentaries are planned, executed, and only *then* are they written.

In this class, students will plan, produce, and edit individual short documentaries. Any topic is open for the creative process – the focus is on finding the story the student wants to tell, followed by the practical process of turning the story idea into a movie.

This is a workshop class, and therefore focused on producing a film. We'll look at the definition of the documentary form, explore the elements to be considered when planning a documentary, and shoot footage, the process of post-production – editing – will happen in Summer II. Post, as you'll see, is where the heavy lifting of documentary work happens.

In lieu of a textbook, we will also screen at least a portion of some significant documentaries during class, including:

Spellbound (2002, Dir. Jeffery Blitz) iTunes rental / Amazon Prime
When We Were Kings (1996, Dir. Leon Gast) Bret Upload
Hoop Dreams (1994, Dir. Steve James) iTunes rental / Amazon Prime
Harlan County, USA (1975, Dir. Barbara Kopple) Bret Upload
Soldier Girls (1981, Dir. Nick Broomfield/Joan Churchill) ...if I can get it.

Communication Program Student Learning Outcomes

SLO 1: Students will be able to analyze communication content for argument, including identification of major elements, such as claim, warrants, and data.

SLO 2: Students will be able to effectively construct messages appropriate to audience, purpose, and context; including electronic media technologies.

SLO 3: Students will be able to apply Communication theories, perspectives, principles, and concepts to the analysis of communication situations.

Communication Program Marketable Skills

- 1) Proficiency in public speaking in a variety of venues and formats,
- 2) Effective writing skills, and
- 3) Demonstrated ability to use technology to deliver messaging.

PREREQUISITES

None.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

By the end of this class, students will:

- Develop a working definition of the documentary form
- Gain familiarity with the elements involved in planning a documentary film
- Demonstrate a working understanding of the various crew roles in documentary production
- Cultivate beginner-level experience with the technology, equipment, and techniques used in professional filmmaking

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS:

- 1) Terminology / Definitions Quiz
- 2) Written Production Plan, including calendar, shot list, equipment list, and budget
- 3) One (1) short paper on a documentary film viewed outside of class
- 4) Final Exam – screen dailies for instructor (not less than 1 hour of unedited footage).
- 5) Full participation in class discussion / critique

Required Textbooks for this class:

None.

Materials Required:

A cellphone that shoots video/records audio. That's it.

CLASS DATES: Assignments and Deadlines

Note that these dates and the details of each class are subject to change at the instructor's discretion

Week	Date	Topics and Assignments
1	May 27	Introduction. Review Syllabus, Assignments, and Deadlines. Expected outcomes. Discussion: What is a story? What is a documentary? Story assignments. Interview techniques. ASSIGNMENTS: Shoot a process
2	June 1	Review process footage. Story ideas due Tuesday. Workshop: Interviews. ASSIGNMENT: Interviews
3	June 8	Review Interviews. Workshop each film's progress as class. ASSIGNMENT: Begin shooting footage.
4	June 15	Review shot footage. Intro post-production.
5	June 21	Review shot footage. Review a completed scene.
6	June 29	Review shot footage.

FINAL EXAM: JULY 1st: footage (selects) must be uploaded by 11AM.

GRADING

Assignments are valued as follows:

1) Terminology / Definitions Quiz	15%
2) Paper	30%
3) Final Exam – Practical Skills Test	35%
4) Full participation in class discussion / critique	20%

Grading Criteria:

A = Exceptional. Demonstrates mastery of material beyond expectation. Professional quality of work. Highest level of scholarship.

B = Above average. Demonstrates mastery of material. Work is of better-than-expected quality, but not quite professional. High level of scholarship.

C = Average. Demonstrates proficiency with material. Work is of amateur quality. Ordinary level of scholarship.

D = Below Average. Less than proficient with material. Work shows errors, careless mistakes, or is just plain wrong. Poor scholarship.

F – Failure. Material incomplete. Work grossly negligent or incomplete. No evidence of scholarship present.

TARDINESS / ABSENCE POLICY

Attendance is 10% of your grade. That's the difference between an "A" and a "B"...or an "F" and a "D."

TARDINESS

Class **BEGINS EXACTLY AT THE APPOINTED TIME**. It is your responsibility to be prepared to begin **BEFORE** the class starts.

Three instances of tardiness is equivalent to one absence. See below for the class absence policy.

THE INSTRUCTOR RESERVES THE RIGHT TO DENY ENTRY TO STUDENTS WHO ARE NOT PRESENT AT THE START OF CLASS* – ON THE HOUR. PLAN ACCORDINGLY. ON-TIME is EARLY!

*Exceptions will be made only for those with classes located in RAS whose end time makes on-time arrival impossible.

Punctuality is essential in this business. Tardiness will not be tolerated.

Absence Policy, from the Sul Ross State University 2012-2014 Course Catalogue:

CLASS ATTENDANCE

Regular class attendance is important to the attainment of the educational objectives of the University. Each instructor will keep class attendance records, and the instructor's policy on class attendance will be explained at the beginning of the semester or term.

The instructors will drop a student from a course when the student has a total of nine absences. A student will be dropped for excessive absences in remedial courses after nine absences.

An absence is defined as non-attendance in fifty minutes of class; for example, non-attendance in a one and one-half hour class will constitute one and one-half absences and non-attendance in a three-hour class will constitute three absences. An absence because of participation in an official University activity is considered to be an authorized absence.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

The University is committed to equal access in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The Accessibility Services Coordinator assists students with disabilities in providing academic programming accommodations. If you need accommodations, please see the instructor for a referral to the Accessibility Services Coordinator.