

Brandeis University – Summer School 2025

Documentary Filmmaking

Course Code: **FILM 125a**

Instructor: **Ambrus Hernadi**

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Office Hours: By Appointment

Course Schedule:

Days: Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday

Time: 11:10 AM - 1:40 PM

Location: 105 SIMS Classroom

Summer Session 1: June 4 – July 3, 2025

Course Description

This course introduces the fundamental tools and principles of documentary filmmaking. By watching and analyzing a substantial number of examples from the genre, we will explore when and why it is worth making a documentary about a particular topic or character. What is the power of non-fiction filmmaking, and what is its validity? How do we work with underrepresented communities, and what ethical concerns must we consider when filming?

We will examine different styles of documentary filmmaking and complete a final project that you will develop throughout the course. In addition to this project, you will have short in-class and homework video assignments to learn the basics of the Sony FX6 camera and Adobe Premiere Pro for editing.

Learning goals

The goal of the class is to help understand basic film language, improve visual thinking and with that learn how to express certain views, ideas, feelings, and stories. This is mainly a practical course, but it is also necessary to read and prepare for every class to get the most out of the subject.

This course meets the University's **Oral Communication Curriculum Criteria**. The seminar is limited to 15 students, ensuring that everyone can actively participate in discussions. We will analyze various film and still-image examples, as well as the students' own work. Through these conversations, students will learn to articulate abstract concepts, creative ideas, and artistic intuitions. Class discussions will involve sharing opinions, debating perspectives, and critically

engaging with ideas and examples presented. Students will present their projects to the class and participate in debates about the examples discussed. It is essential to successfully participate in group critiques of creative work and improve your work through these conversations. Individual feedback on communication and presentation skills will be provided throughout the semester. In the filmmaking industry, mastering these skills is essential for persuading people to fund your ideas or assembling a creative team around your project.

During the five weeks of the course, students will be required to present twice in front of the class. Each presentation should be a coherent, well-organized pitch (or speech) in which students use visual examples to support their reasoning. These presentations will be connected to the students' own visual work and will help them better understand their decision-making process, both for the class and for their personal development.

Course Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Understand and analyze various documentary filmmaking styles and genres.
 - Operate a Sony FX6 camera and utilize fundamental cinematography techniques.
 - Develop storytelling techniques specific to documentary filmmaking.
 - Edit footage using Adobe Premiere Pro.
 - Address ethical considerations in documentary filmmaking.
 - Create a compelling short documentary project.
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Course Structure

This course is structured around lectures, screenings, discussions, hands-on camera exercises, and editing workshops. Students will complete four short assignments working both individually and in groups and develop a final documentary project after the five-week course ends. The films created for this class will focus on dramatic development and creative storytelling through image composition, camera movement, editing, lighting, and sound.

Course Assignments

Short Assignments (4 Total):

Each of these assignments is designed to build key skills necessary for documentary filmmaking and are building blocks for the final project.

1. Visual Composition and Framing

- Record a 2-minute observational documentary-style sequence with no dialogue, focusing on framing and camera movement.
- Due: End of Week 1

2. Interview Techniques

- Conduct and film a short 3–5-minute interview with a subject, experimenting with different angles and lighting setups.
- Due: End of Week 2

3. Editing Exercise

- Edit a 4–5-minute sequence using provided footage, focusing on continuity, and pacing.
- Due: End of Week 3

4. Sound and Atmosphere

- Record and edit a soundscape (1-2 minutes) that tells a story through ambient sound and minimal visuals.
- Due: End of Week 4
- Oral Presentation (5-10 minutes)

Final Project:

- A 6–10-minute short documentary on a topic of the student's choice.
- Students will develop their projects during the course and complete them after the summer session ends.
- A rough cut must be submitted by July 2, 2025. The final cut is due by July 9, 2025.
- Oral Presentation (5-10 minutes)

Grading Breakdown

- Short Assignments: 40% (10% each)
 - Participation and In-Class Exercises: 20%
 - Final Project Proposal & Development: 10%
 - Final Documentary Film: 30%
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Required Equipment & Software

- **Camera:** Sony FX6 (provided by Brandeis University)
 - **Lenses:** Sony and Leica lenses
 - **Editing Software:** Adobe Premiere Pro (available in the lab)
 - **Storage:** External hard drive (recommended, at least 500GB) OR EditShare
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Course Schedule

Week 1: Foundations of Documentary Filmmaking

- Introduction to the course and syllabus
- Screening and discussion: History and evolution of documentary film
- Hands-on camera workshop: Sony FX6 basics
- Assignment 1: Visual Composition and Framing

Week 2: Interview Techniques & Ethical Considerations

- Screening and discussion: Ethics in documentary filmmaking
- Workshop: Conducting and filming interviews
- Assignment 2: Interview Techniques

Week 3: Editing & Storytelling in Documentary

- Screening and discussion: Narrative structures in documentary film
- Editing workshop: Adobe Premiere Pro basics
- Assignment 3: Editing Exercise

Week 4: Sound, Atmosphere & Directing Documentary Subjects

- Screening and discussion: Role of sound in documentaries
- Workshop: Capturing ambient sound and sound design
- Assignment 4: Sound and Atmosphere

Week 5: Project Development & Final Review

- Workshop: Developing your final project
 - Feedback sessions and individual project planning
 - Final project proposal submission
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Policies & Expectations

Attendance:

This class meets three times per week, and the attendance at each class is **mandatory**. You may miss a class if you have **prior approval** from the instructor. If you miss a class without prior notification, you can be dropped from the course. If you are late to class **more than two times**, without prior notification, you can be **dropped** from the course. If your unexcused absence or third late arrival occurs after the drop/add period, you may receive a **failing grade** for the course. If you frequently miss class or arrive late, it can negatively affect your grade.

There will be an expectation of respecting our time together and listening to each other in class.

Grading

This class is collaborative by its very nature, therefore your work might affect others' grades. My overall attitude towards grading has to do with effort, engagement with material you are creating, and growth over the course of the semester. The final grade is determined by the finished assignments, weekly responses, class performance, attendance and by meeting the deadlines over the semester.

All the graded assignments are relying on a **collaboration** between several students. It is essential to reach out to me on time, if you are having a hard time working with your partner or reaching out to someone from the group. I won't accept the reporting of such acts or behavior during the last week of working on the project or after you finalized the film.

Missing any assignment or handing it in late will affect your grade. You must complete all assignments to receive a passing grade, especially because all the practical assignments are building blocks that work toward a successful final project. Late assignments will be automatically marked down one grade (for example: B to B-) for every week they are late.

WEEKLY RESPONSES TO VIEWINGS AND READINGS

You will be expected to engage every week with the readings and viewings offered by this class. This means that you will be asked to interact in class and through MOODLE with the readings and viewings in the forum of a response journal. The goal is to create an open dialogue in class and outside of it as well. You must have **at least 6 responses** posted to MOODLE for this section of the grade to count (10% of the grade). No requirement in the length of these responses.

Write them to the [„Ask the Class Forum“](#) discussion board with clicking on the **„Add a new discussion topic“**. Please make sure to name your response as it follows:

Date_First Name_Title (of the reading or viewing you are responding to)

e.g.: 06.04_Ambrus_ Directing. Film techniques

Final Notes

This course is intensive but highly rewarding. You will leave with a strong foundation in documentary filmmaking and a completed short film to add to your portfolio. Since you will work in groups as well, it will be essential to be a team player and co-operate with the others. You will learn a lot just by assisting to other projects and others can help a lot in improving your own film. If you have any questions, feel free to reach out via email or schedule an appointment.

Looking forward to an exciting summer of documentary filmmaking!