Rocking a Documentary Film

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This article is about exploring a more creative genre option than paper- writing: the documentary genre. In this article, the reader will learn about what makes a good documentary film and how to approach different elements of filmmaking. The reader will also find information on how to relate the process of creating a documentary to writing a research paper. This article can help with other types of projects such as filming music videos or skits.

Let me be the first to admit that I hate writing papers. Personally, I can't find much to like about it. The pressure of creating a concise paper (along with the tedious task of constructing organized ideas into words) never sounds very pleasant to me. On my bad days, it'll take me two hours to write a single paragraph because the allure of Facebook and my friends down the hall takes over. After spending four years of high school in advanced placement English courses and then taking two years of college English, the thought, alone, of writing another final paper was enough to push me over the edge. For our final project in my Literary Narrative course, my instructor gave us the option to either write a paper or come up with a creative project. I jumped at the opportunity to steer clear of a paper.

Without very much thought or preconceived ideas, I chose to make a documentary and dove head first into an outlet that I taught myself to utilize. Choosing to create a film was a much better route for me as student because it allowed me to fully check in to my imagination and produce something that many different audiences can enjoy. I liked the idea of making a film instead of writing a paper because film is a genre with endless creative options. Not only does the visual component of films create appeal, but also the auditory element contributes to capturing the audience. I do not regret a single bit that I said "No" to writing

another paper, but I would've probably regretted not using my inventiveness to my advantage.

Never in a million years did I think I would have the opportunity to make a project on something as rebellious as punk rock in a classroom setting. I fell in love with punk rock at the age of eleven. After watching the Adam Sandler movie *The Wedding Singer* and seeing punk rock legend Billy Idol basically save the day, punk became a fascination of mine. I fell in love with the fast chords, angry lyrics, and the ability it has to perfectly match your emotions, whether they are aggressive or calm. Out of all the music genres, I believe punk is the most fun. It's about "sticking it to the man," so to speak; it's about living your life the way you want to and saying "No" to anyone who tells you otherwise. Fortunately for me, I was blessed with a unique and vivacious instructor, Amy Magnafichi, who opened the door to explore different genres.

During class one day, Amy listed off many different genre options we could pursue for our final project. There were the obvious choices that many chose, such as a paper or a poster, but then there were some off-the-map choices such as making a film or documentary. Knowing that I wanted to do something on punk rock, the idea of using a documentary film to showcase my favorite musical genre suddenly became the most interesting project I could've ever dreamed of. The concept of making a film from scratch that encapsulated all the different elements of punk rock sounded so fascinating to me, so I signed on. There are so many things possible with film that one cannot capture with two-dimensional writing. In essence, film allows an audience to dive into a created world rich in sensory stimulation. The information is delivered to them fast and efficiently, and it's much easier to retain their attention with different music choices and interesting pictures. Filmmakers engage their audiences' senses and expose them to information in an entertaining way.

Initial Anxiety

The only problem with all this was that I had never made a documentary film before, and quite frankly, had no clue where to start. I had used iMovie previously for other classes and family films, but I had never had to create an original documentary using tools like interviews, music videos, and voice-over work.

On the first day I began my documentary, I probably spent more time twiddling my thumbs than actually on Google doing any research. I remember sitting at my MacBook Pro with iMovie opened, staring at a blank screen and feeling a sweat break out on my forehead. I was initially pretty stressed about the film and didn't think I was going to make something worthwhile. Being a nursing major with a heavy science workload, I was concerned that I wasn't

tech-savvy enough to actually pull off a film that would interest anyone. The more I thought about how amazing I wanted the documentary to be, the more anxiety and despair I felt as I convinced myself that I wouldn't be able to meet my own expectations for the film.

I found myself constantly trying to think of a concept that would grasp my viewers. I didn't want my film to seem like a PowerPoint, thrown together at the last minute. I decided that it was going to need many different elements in order to hold the attention of my audience. After doing some critical thinking about what would engage my audience the most, I decided that the use of audio and visual simultaneously would create the effect I wanted. By coordinating what was on the screen with the type of music playing, my audience's senses could be even further stimulated. I also knew I needed to use lots of pictures and special effects to hold my audience's attention.

Genre Research

Once I started to build up my confidence and realized that yes, I could actually do this (doesn't every student experience that initial fear?), the ideas started to pour in. I realized that I could pull off the documentary style once I started to write down my ideas and build a basic timeline for my film. That way, I could see exactly what I needed to cover and wasn't left scrambling for ideas. After I worked through my initial fears, I found that teaching myself how to make the documentary wasn't as difficult as I thought it would be. I had to teach myself how to download and incorporate music into the film, integrate previously recorded interviews into the film, film my own interviews, and do voice-over work to enhance the information. I found that the best way to navigate iMovie (which was the option I had because I have a MacBook— any movie editing software would work) is to toy around with it and test out all the different functions before I even began my project. There are many different moviemakers out there, and the majority of them have tutorials online that are easy to access. Although I'm sure many people would benefit from viewing the tutorials, I found the best way for me to learn was to dive right in. The features are endless and the more I explored the program, the more tools I found to further impress my audience. Personally, I think that watching a bunch of slides slung together with no sound would be much less engrossing than quick facts with a visually engaging background and special effects set to relevant music. If a project is boring to make, then the chances the audience will be entertained are slim. Being a punk rock fan for practically a decade really helped in my original planning of the documentary because I knew that there was no way something as versatile and energetic as punk could fail to be enthralling.

During my genre research phase, I watched a lot of music videos and documentaries on YouTube. While perusing through the videos, I found that a music documentary is a lot like most music videos; there typically is a focus and the music correlates with the story. I got a good idea of the natural flow music documentaries needed to take and the importance of the music itself within the documentary. This was one element that I knew I needed to include in my documentary, especially because my topic was on a musical genre! I decided to go with punk rock songs with high energy to set the pace for the rest of the film. For the most part, the songs I chose were from the 70s and 80s, but I did choose two 90s songs, one by Blink-182 and the other by The Offspring, when discussing present day punk. By coordinating the music with the time frame I was discussing, my audience received an immediate example of what they were learning.

Content Research

When it came to researching the content of my film, I found it best to start with my instructor. I was unsure of where to begin, so I asked Amy for advice and she steered me in the right direction. Since I already had a pretty decent knowledge base of punk rock history, all I needed to do was some preliminary research of specific facts, which isn't difficult nowadays with the abundance of information you can find on the internet. The most difficult part of my documentary was finding interviews that I wanted to incorporate. I knew that the use of previously recorded interviews could be powerful in my film and make it seem more professional, so I spent a good ten hours exploring YouTube and all the wonderful videos it has to offer. When looking for interviews, quality is definitely more important than quantity. Sometimes I would find clips that were only fifteen seconds long (like the Dee Dee Ramone interview) that were just so much more powerful than some five-minute-long interviews I came across featuring other punk rockers. Most of the clips from the 70s on YouTube aren't of the best visual quality, but including the clips enhanced my documentary because it really established the correct time period. After weeding out interviews that were too long or off topic, I found some great ones that boosted my documentary substantially! One of the main ideas that I was trying to get across in my film— that punk rockers could be arrogant but fun—was easy to express once I found interviews that showed how rebellious (and intriguing) they could be.

Composing

I chose to have a live performance of the Sex Pistols' *Anarchy in the UK* as the opener because I wanted to set the pace for the documentary. The Sex Pistols performing that song captured all the energy and rebellion that I

wanted my film to possess. For the viewer that knows little to nothing about punk rock, I knew that I needed to expose them to it immediately in order for them to be drawn in right away. The music video I used was essentially the equivalent of an "attention-getter" in a paper—I knew it would intrigue my audience and let them know that the video they were about to watch wouldn't just be boring facts and no fun.

When it came to the visual aspects of my film, I knew that I needed to set the correct tone with my background choices and font. The font that I chose, Cracked, which essentially is an edgy style with cracked lettering, was a no- brainer; I knew that it conveyed the rebellious and badass look I was going for. This font worked a lot better for my film than a font such as Times New Roman because it immediately set the tone right off the bat. One of the main lessons I learned while making this film was that consistency is key. I chose to keep the font consistent throughout the entire film in order to prevent the film from appearing disorganized or amateurish. I chose to coordinate my backgrounds with the three topics I was discussing: punk history, punk fashion, and present-day punk. Although punks are notorious for using bright colors, the original NYC punk scene was more "underground," and I wanted to set that mood with a completely black background for the history section. I transitioned the background into an industrialized look for the fashion section, so that the viewer could visually tell that the topic was changing. I switched the background to gray when discussing present-day punk to "lighten the mood," so to speak. While discussing 70s punk in the past, I used all black backgrounds, so when it came time to move to the present, the lighter background helped signal a shift in time.

In order to really personalize my documentary and make it mine instead of a collection of previously recorded interviews and music videos, I knew that I needed to include my own interviews. This was actually one of the first ideas I came up with for my film. My target audience, college students, needed to be included in my film in order for them to identify with it. And since I knew that there were varying degrees of knowledge of punk rock on campus, I thought it'd be entertaining to interview students at random. In order to get a more accurate depiction of the student body's perceptions, I knew I needed to approach people other than my friends. I also used this opportunity to do a little field research and get a grasp on how much/how little students actually know about punk rock. The interviewing process went pretty smoothly, and I only encountered a few less-than-willing participants. A lot of students tried to back out of it by claiming, "I don't know anything about punk rock!" without realizing that they were exactly who I wanted to interview. If I were to do this again, I would make a sign saying "interviewees needed," instead of just randomly approaching whoever walked by.

Even though I sought out strangers for my interviews, I was fortunate enough to have friends that were willing to assist me in the making of my film. My friends, Nicole and Lindsey, were more than accommodating; they let me dress them up in full outfits and even acted out their roles. I had Nicole portray fashion misconceptions of a punk rocker and Lindsey modeled early 80's punk fashion. I'm really glad they did this for me because it added a personalized element to my film that gave it a more authentic feel. I decided to do voice-overs during their segments because I knew that if I put text over the video it would take away from their performances.

Putting the whole film together took some trial and error. I essentially created the blueprint as I went along, which isn't what you're typically supposed to do, but it worked for me. I basically let the film take over itself, and I would follow the natural direction that it was headed in. Although I didn't make a complete outline for my project, I did know what I wanted to cover. Figuring out first how I wanted to break up and present the material really helped when I wasn't sure what to do next because I wasn't completely left in the dark when the ideas didn't come automatically. After I completed my project and made sure to cite all my sources in the end, I submitted a piece of work that I was very proud of and genuinely knew would entertain my audience. I watched the documentary and showed it to my roommate and friends who were all intrigued and actually enjoyed viewing it. I felt a great sense of accomplishment and like a real filmmaker. It was much more rewarding for me than turning in a piece of paper like the rest of the class!

Looking back on that class and my choice to make a documentary, I don't regret it one bit. I sometimes find myself watching my film out of the blue, and I love it. I really enjoyed exploring this genre and actually had a lot of fun creating my original documentary. Whenever I felt overwhelmed by it, I would just take a step back and see what I had created so far, and any doubt would vanish. Although it was a fun and creative genre to explore, there is no possible way I could have completed it without weeks of hard work and a few sessions of dedicated research. Preparation and investigative work are a must, but once I covered those, I really dove in and showed what I was capable of making! I had a ton of fun with it, and it was a much less stressful process than any other genre I've tried.

Kara Steiner is currently a senior in the Mennonite College of Nursing at Illinois State University. After graduation she hopes to work as a NICU nurse in the city of Chicago. When she is not at school, she lives at home in Naperville, Illinois with her family and three beloved dogs. In addition to being an avid music fan, Kara enjoys spending time in the great outdoors, exercising, cheering for the American League Baseball Club in Chicago, and quoting Seinfeld episodes.