



Documentary Pre-Production

MRTS 5760 – Spring 2026

COURSE INFORMATION

Section - 001

Time – Thursdays 2-4:50pm

Location - RTFP 282

Instructor – Frances Perkins

Office – 263 (right next to the Media Arts office)

Office Hours– Media Arts - T/TH 12:30-2pm, W 1-2pm

Office Hours – Honors Hall Lobby - T 3-5pm, W 5-7pm

Office Hours - Virtual - Book a meeting here: [Frances' Virtual Office Hours](#)

Email – frances.perkins@unt.edu

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Graduate Documentary Preproduction should be considered the first course in a 3-course sequence to prepare and produce your 2nd year documentary film:

1. 5760 Documentary Pre-Production – Spring 2026
 1. Proposal and pre-production of 2nd year film
2. 5790 Advanced Documentary Workshop I - Production – Fall 2026
 1. Production of 2nd year film
 1. Directing your own film

2. Crewing on classmates' films
2. 5791 Advanced Documentary Workshop II - Postproduction – Spring 2027
 1. Post-production on 2nd year film
 1. Editing a classmate's film
 2. Working with editor on your film

The required Documentary Preproduction seminar for First-Year MFA students covers the process of **pre-producing for independent and documentary films**.

Topics will include:

- Idea development - subject research, on-site research, writing styles, documentary writing.
- Business processes – fundraising, grant writing, international shooting concerns, budgeting, legal concerns.
- Prepping for production - working with documentary subjects, collaborating with crew, ethics.
- After film completion – distribution, P.R./Social Media, the festival circuit, etc.

Beyond the actual preparation and production of a film, we'll be exploring some **collaborative skills** to prepare for working as tight, professional teams in the coming year: career/self-goals, leadership, ethics, personality tendencies, strengths, weaknesses and working styles.

The semester will focus heavily on a **DOCUMENTARY PROPOSAL and PRODUCTION BOOK** for your 2nd-Year MFA Documentary Production. Your 2nd year (approximately 20-minute) documentary film should be of the next step in your professional and artistic development. The aim is to surpass your 1st year film in terms of the theoretical, technical and structural caliber, and should challenge you to be of higher conceptual, creative and artistic level than your 1st Year documentary. It is expected that you work at the level of a professional creator/graduate student in terms of content and approach.

COURSE ORGANIZATION

Most class days during the semester we will meet as a group. There are some prescribed workdays to support your research and writing obligations and are noted in the class schedule. Please be on time for each class. Absences will be excused only with official, written documentation of medical or other emergency obligations.

COURSE LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

1. To articulate a detailed description of all major aspects of documentary pitching and pre-production in the form of a Documentary Proposal.
2. To develop pre-production skills that can be directly applied to the 2nd year film production.
3. To assemble the major aspects of pre-production into an actionable process for the 2nd year film and future work in the form of a Production Book.
4. To analyze course information about cinematic forms, stylistic approaches and non-fiction storytelling and infer how each applies to your own filmmaking.
5. To explore possibilities in the documentary form, and to distinguish the best approaches to your chosen subject matter, with the intent to grow artistically and conceptually.
6. To construct an ethical framework for your work as a documentary director, with a specific focus on the film being proposed.
7. To identify and practice strong collaborative and leadership skills necessary for success in the field of documentary production.

TEXTBOOKS - REQUIRED

Writing, Directing and Producing Documentary Films and Digital Videos, 5th Edition by Alan Rosenthal, Ned Eckhart - Southern Illinois Press 2016, ISBN: 978-0-8093-3459-9

The Documentary Distribution Toolkit by Rachel Gordon – Routledge 2022, ISBN: 978-0-367-71547-2

TEXTBOOKS - RECOMMENDED

Independent Filmmaker's Law and Business Guide, 2nd Edition by Jon Garon – Chicago Review Press 2009, ISBN: 978-1556528330

Film and Video Budgets, 6th Edition by Maureen A. Ryan – Michael Weise Productions 2015, ISBN: 978-1615932214

Rules of Engagement

Rules of engagement refer to the way students are expected to interact with each other and with their instructors online. Here are some general guidelines:

- Treat your instructor and classmates with respect in email or any other communication.
- Since there are in class discussions on readings and other required assignments, stay on top of things; watch deadlines, schedule assignments into your own calendar and make time to work on them so you are not late.

- Use clear and concise language. When writing academic responses, rise to the level of graduate level composition at an institution of higher learning.
- Remember that all college level communication should have correct spelling and grammar. PROOF-READ your work before submission.
- Avoid slang terms and texting abbreviations.
- For documents use standard 12 point font, 1-inch margins.
- Be cautious when using humor or sarcasm as tone is sometimes lost in an email or in-class discussion, and your message might be taken seriously or sound offensive.
- Be careful with personal information (both yours and others').
- Do not send confidential information via e-mail.

Artificial Intelligence will be periodically discussed in class. The use of artificial intelligence tools without full transparency violates professional media standards of journalism and violates the University policies regarding Academic Integrity (also see below). Violations of either or both policies will result in disciplinary action up to and including a failing grade on a specific assignment or in this course.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Schedule Overview

This class time should always be available to you, and you must plan on attending.

- Some weeks we may agree as a group to meet via Zoom.
- Individual meetings may be planned in lieu of class meetings.
- Any cancelled Thursdays will be sent to you in advance.
- Class cancellations due to weather will not have any work assigned or due.
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UNIT 1 – Collaborating and Directing

Week 1 - 1/15

Topics – Course overview, expectations, assignments, textbook discussions, current production review.

Activity – Personal Mission Statement, Artist Statement, Professional Bios/LinkedIn Profiles.

Assignment – Mission/Artists Statement due Jan 22.

Week 2 - 1/22

Topics – Identifying leadership and collaborative skills, reviewing production and post-production skills, current production review.

Activities – Leadership Style Quiz, doc screening and analysis

Presentation/Discussion – Producing Chapter 1

Assignment: DBFF Screening Report due Feb 12.

UNIT 2 – Style, Substance and Storytelling

Week 3 - 1/29

Topics – Brainstorm film ideas, review documentary styles/forms, discuss best approaches to brainstormed topics.

Activity – doc viewing and discussion

Assignment – Favorite Doc Clip – due in class Feb 5.

Presentation/Discussion – Producing Chapter 2

Week 4 – 2/5

Topics - Project breakdown checklist, tackling the checklist, budgets and current production review.

Activity – doc viewing and discussion, favorite clip screening

Reminder - DBFF Screening Report due next week

Presentation/Discussion – Producing Chapter 3

UNIT 3 – Idea Development and Proposals

Week 5 - 2/12

Topics – Fostering Creativity and Brainstorm film ideas, review discuss best approaches to brainstormed topics.

Activity – Fav clips screening, Brainstorming Worksheet

Presentation/Discussion – Producing Chapter 4

Assignment: Short Doc Screening Report due Feb 19

Reminder – the brainstorming we are doing is to help you pick topic for 2nd year film before week 7, when we start working on it specifically.

Week 6 – 2/19

Topic – Doc Proposal Worksheet exercise – the WHY of making your film

Activities – Use current doc project to workshop the proposal and think through all the elements

Presentation/Discussion – Producing Chapter 5

Reminder – pick topic for 2nd year film before next week!

Week 7 – 2/26 – VIRTUAL CLASS

Topic – Research and Ethical Filmmaking

Activity – Research activity, CRAAP test, workshop Rough Draft proposals

Assignment – 2nd year Documentary Proposal

Rough Draft due 3/5 IN CLASS

Final Proposal due 3/19 end-of-day

Week 8 – 3/5

Topic – Proposal Workshop

Presentation/Discussion – Distribution Chapter 1

Reminder – 2nd year Final Proposal due end-of-day 3/19

MARCH 9-13 - SPRING BREAK

UNIT 4 – Pre-Production and Planning

Week 9 - 3/20

Topic – Doc Production Breakdown – the HOW of making your film

Activity – prepping Production Book, elements and considerations.

Presentation/Discussion – Distribution Chapter 2

Assignment – 2nd year Documentary Production Book

Rough draft due 4/23 in class

Final draft due 5/7 end-of-day

Week 10 - 3/27

Topic – Locations, Talent and Travel

Activity – guest speakers TBD

Presentation/Discussion – Distribution Chapter 3

Week 11 - 4/3

Topic – Business Processes – budgeting, fundraising grant writing, legal considerations

Presentation/Discussion – Distribution Chapter 4

Week 12 - 4/10 – VIRTUAL CLASS

Topic – Interviewing Subjects

Activity – guest speakers TBD

Activity – Interview brainstorming

Week 13 - 4/17

Topic - After film completion – distribution, PR, social media, the festival circuit, etc.

Activity – workshop distribution plan

Presentation/Discussion – Distribution Chapter 5

Week 14 - 4/24

Topic – Production Book rough draft due IN CLASS

Activity – Production Book Workshop

Presentation/Discussion – Distribution Chapter 6

Week 15 - 5/1

Presentation/Discussion – Distribution Chapter 7

Reminder – Final Production Book due MAY 7th

Grading Criteria

Grading will be based on effort exhibited, presentation readiness and adherence to assignment requirements. Rubrics will be used where applicable.

Assignments and Points

Assignments	Points
Presentation/Discussions (25 points each)	50
Mission/Artist Statement	25
Favorite Doc Clip	25
DBFF Screening Report	25
Documentary Screening Report	25
Doc Analysis Worksheet (in class)	25
Idea Brainstorming Worksheet (in class)	25
Documentary Proposal – draft	50
Documentary Proposal - final	100
Production Book - draft	50
Production Book - final	100
TOTAL	500

UNT Grading Scale

Grade	Percentage
A	90+ - The work is consistently outstanding.
B	80+ - The work is consistently strong and occasionally outstanding.
C	70+ - The work is adequate, fulfilling minimum requirements.
D	60+ - The work fails to meet minimum standards.
F	below 60 - The work is incomplete, or evidence of plagiarism.

Academic Integrity

Plagiarism is the presentation of someone else's ideas or words as your own. It will not be tolerated. Even when you are paraphrasing, you must give appropriate (and formal) credit to the source of the ideas or the words. Plagiarism will result in a failing course grade. For more information refer to the [UNT Student Academic Integrity Policy](#).

Assignments

- All documents/written work must be typed, double-spaced, 12pt font, 1-inch margins on all sides, or in screenplay format where applicable.
- No handwritten assignment will be accepted unless otherwise stated in assignments (i.e. storyboards, diagrams).
- All document submissions **MUST BE IN MICROSOFT WORD (.doc, .docx) or ADOBE ACROBAT (.pdf) formats.** You can also use Google Docs or another web-based application if you supply me a link to your document.
- All assignments are due by the end-of-day on the due date (meaning 11:59pm on the due date) unless otherwise stated in the assignment.
- All outside information must be properly cited. Visit [Citing Sources](#) from the UNT Library for more information.
- If you are unable to upload your assignments to Canvas, you may try emailing it to me. NOTE: emailing me assignments will result in delay in grading.

Grading

Grades will be figured out of a total of 500 points. You are allowed TWO late assignments, graded at 80% of the total possible points for that assignment (so if an assignment is worth 10 points, the highest score a late assignment could receive is 8 points).

Grading will be done within one (1) week of the due date for that assignment. I give you a week or more to do each assignment, so I give myself a week to grade it. If there is ever a delay in grading, I will post an explanation in announcements.

Participation

Class participation is part of your final grade; I expect you to participate in all discussions. This is a communication course and you must be able to communicate, experiment and share your ideas with your classmates. The instructor reserves the right to implement pop quizzes if the class does not read the assigned material.

Philosophy of Grading

What I look for and care most about is the obvious thought and energy that goes into your work. Connecting the dots between lessons, readings, and your writing is what this course is all about. Doing literally what is asked for in an assignment usually requires the least amount of effort and care, and it comes across in your work. Putting thought and effort into an assignment also comes across in the work. I am always willing to read first drafts, watch cuts, give notes, or answer questions at any time. I am always frustrated by giving someone a lower grade who says, after the fact, "Well, I wasn't sure exactly what you wanted ..."