Student Video Documentary Assignment

In various fields, students can build composition skills and acquire a critical understanding of video media by creating their own videos. The process may include (and assess) research, writing, editing, image and audio analysis skills, together with practical technology literacy. Now more than ever, tools for making video and spaces for housing and presenting it via the internet are cheap and easy to use.

A simple video assignment can require students to create a short video documentary that involves (mainly) still images and narrative voiceover. More complex variations on this may have animations, live-action video (of students themselves or footage recorded by a third party), music, and so on. Students may find still images from a variety of sources, but bear in mind that most of your students now carry phones that include high quality cameras, and that are capable of photography and video recording.

However you choose to create a video assignment, we strongly suggest you go through each step and create your own video, to best understand exactly what you’re asking your students to do.

Basic Considerations

Is this a group project? Or is each student completing her or his own video?

A single video, under fifteen minutes in length, is a reasonable project for undergraduate students at all levels. Students may work together to produce videos. If this is done by having each student contribute a smaller video clip, students should be sure to use similar video formats (for example, .mp4 files.)

How long is the video to be?

Or, how much of the students’ efforts and grade in the course will be occupied by this video project? Small video pieces, such as book trailer assignments or blog posts, may be around five minutes. A fifteen minute video might take the place of a term paper, since the writing, image discover and editing, and final production jobs could be substantial. Generally fifteen minutes is probably the maximum length for an undergraduate video project that is not the central assessment of a methods course.

Outline, Script, or Storyboard

Students should prepare content before recording and editing video. At the very least, an outline should guide a small, less-formal video production. Ideally a student should compose a script about a subject, a process involving critical analysis of a source or sources, and possibly research in depth on a topic. This can take various forms; one option is something closely akin to a traditional research paper, including source citation and a bibliography. Or students may complete a storyboard, linking portions of narration (text) to specific images that will appear on screen.

Fifteen minutes should be allowed for roughly 1200 words of script. A draft of a script or storyboard, handed in several weeks before the finished video, can be a separate assessment that provides student with feedback before recording.

Technical Options

Video creation tools offer a variety of options beyond just displaying static images with a narration. As a requirement or optionally, your students may include:

- Video clips, either from a third party (for example, historical sources) or of the student(s) themselves.
- Dramatic transitions between images or clips.
- A musical score or soundtrack.
- Captions, including image source citation.
- Title pages, an on-screen bibliography or works cited page.

Video Creation: Teaching the Mechanics

Students will need to learn some basic technology skills for creating, uploading, and sharing videos. Below are quick video tutorials.

You may watch these videos to familiarize yourself with how your students can create and share videos in your class. These videos make no reference to a specific class and enable students to make and share videos for various kinds of assignments. You may include these videos within your own class, making them available to students. Rather than (repeatedly) spend time in class teaching these workflows, a professor can instead point students to short tutorial videos like these, which they can watch (as many times as they need) outside of class time.
This lengthy video tutorial, by Justin Brown, covers iMovie, Mac’s complimentary videomaking software.

At places like YouTube, and education-oriented websites you man find tutorials that other people have made (as with the above examples) that can demonstrate to students how to make videos. However, existing tutorials on the web (video or otherwise) may have more or less than your students need for your class, and may not be ideal. As with any assignment, you’ll need to consider whether existing resources are appropriate, or something more specific must be made.

Cheap and Free Options for Video

Below are several applications, either desktop- or web-based, that enable you and your students to create videos incorporating static or dynamic content. Some, such as Screencast-O-Matic, just record whatever's on screen, together with a voiceover. These can be used in conjunction with presentation apps such as Prezi or Google Presentations. Others, such as iMovie, enable users to add images, record a narration, and edit all on a video playtrack. Microsoft Powerpoint, widely available for Windows users, simply records narrations and slide timings for a slideshow presentation, and exports the resulting presentation in .mp4 video format.

Your students may know of, or discover, and elect to use other software. That’s fine, so long as they complete the objectives of your assignment. What is more, you can make clear to students that part of the assignment is learning how to make a video. With the wealth of tools and tutorials available, it is reasonable that they learn this on their own, rather than insisting you teach them the steps.

### Screencast-O-Matic (free version)
Ideal for everyday screencast and webcam recording. Free version allows 15 minute videos with a minor watermark. Videos recorded can be sent directly to Screencast-O-Matic's hosting site or YouTube, and allows video file creation for hosting in Google Drive. Videos can record and include screencasts, webcams, or both. Paid version includes editing and scripting tools.

### Screencast-O-Matic & YouTube
An excellent whiteboarding tool for tablets that records all activity as a screencast. Ideal for discussing maps or images with annotations.

### Microsoft PowerPoint
Microsoft PowerPoint, particularly 2013 and 2016, can easily export slideshows with narrations and timings to .MP4 video files.

### QuickTime & iMovie for Mac
Mac computers include excellent tools for webcam and screencast recording and editing.

### Hosting Videos
Once a video is created, in order for it to be shared it needs to be hosted, or stored and made available somewhere on the internet. You may have your students upload videos to places like YouTube but this should only be in specific cases where it is understood, from the beginning of the course, that they are making video available on the public internet (that is, for anyone in the world.) This might be useful, for example, if you are specifically having teams of students create explainer videos for use in K-12 education.

However, in most cases you may wish to limit access to student video creations to your course. Within D2L, you can use Panopto to both host your videos, as well as create a space for students to upload videos for you to see (and assess). Students “hand in” videos to Panopto, but in processes quite similar to submitting other assigned work in D2L. If they are submitting the video only for you to see, they go through a D2L dropbox. If students upload and add their videos via a Discussion Topic in D2L, then other students can see (and comment on) their videos.

COLI supplies specific tutorials both for you and your students for the Panopto Assignments process.

Other Resources

Here’s a great discussion of creating a documentary video assignment (aimed at K-12 students, but certainly adaptable to higher ed.)

University of Houston’s College of Education: Educational Uses of Digital Storytelling.

Sample Assignment: Builds on a traditional term paper assignment, having students bring traditional scholarship into video creation. It was created for an undergraduate history course geared primarily toward freshmen and non-history majors.