

## Proceedings from the 2019 CEA Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana: Imaginative Revision Strategies in the Foundational Writing Classroom: Envisioning an Essay as a Documentary Film

**Andrea Walsh**

*Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

The only people who see the whole picture are the ones who step out of the frame.

-Salman Rushdie

This article, based on my teaching experience at MIT, focuses on a strategy to inspire students to approach the revision process proactively with imagination and critical insight: envisioning essays as documentary films. First, let's look at some central tasks of revision and then explore the ways that documentary films can help address those challenges.

In foundational undergraduate composition courses, revision has become central to a process model of writing, which involves a series of steps: pre-writing/brainstorming, drafting a first version, receiving peer and instructor feedback and revising a piece. As writing instructors, we aim to inspire a process of extensive or “deep” revision, in which a student re-imagines an essay from various angles and envisions its fullest possibilities. This approach echoes Adrienne Rich’s proactive sense of revision as “seeing with fresh eyes” as well as Peter Elbow’s types of revision: “changing the bones” (rethinking the piece) and “changing the muscles” (reshaping or reworking the essay).

An expansive revision process incorporates elements of, but most importantly transcends, two other popular modes of revising: (a) a limited practice of sentence-level error correction that may have counted as “revision” for many students during high school and (b) a more comprehensive, but primarily reactive approach to revision, practiced mainly in college classes, which focuses on student response to instructor and peer feedback. This last approach – responding to critical feedback – is absolutely essential in college writing instruction. However, some students report that, in this phase, they often focus less on expressing their own voice and more on figuring out how best to satisfy instructor expectations. To achieve the full power of the revision process, we also need to help re-awaken in our students the joy of discovering new ideas and approaches and refining their own unique voices as writers, as well as responding to critical feedback. For inspiration, we turn to documentary film.

Introductory writing courses, especially those focusing on social and ethical issues, often screen documentaries for various reasons: to inspire student engagement, to motivate discussion and to analyze visual rhetoric. Citizens of the digital age, many college students are visual learners who seem more comfortable in front of screens than books or articles. We also currently find ourselves in a “golden age” of documentaries, easily accessible on streaming platforms such as Netflix and Kanopy.

Early in the semester in my *Rhetoric and Contemporary Issues* course, by screening a few classic U.S. documentaries, I teach students to identify some basic techniques and choices in documentary filmmaking. Through analyzing such films as *Food, Inc.* (Robert Kenner, 2008) and *Consuming Kids* (Adriana Barbara and Jeremy Earp, 2009), for example, I introduce my writing students to the use of voice-over, selection of introductory or establishing visuals, role of

“talking heads,” effective editing techniques, the inclusion of music and the narrative power of concluding words and images. To teach “documentary literacy,” I choose films that employ traditional storytelling and editing techniques, rather than experimental or open-ended documentaries (attached is a worksheet I distribute in class).

While documentaries serve as valuable resources for students in many ways during the writing and research process, they can play a unique role in revision. After completing an initial draft, a student can step back, review a piece as a whole, identify revision challenges and envision an essay as a documentary film. Through this approach, student authors can think about revision possibilities in more expansive and creative ways that transcend a process of simply “responding to comments” and “correcting errors.” They may revise their pieces not only to clarify existing material or add needed information, but also to introduce new angles of vision and to re-imagine their relationship to their subject in a fundamental way. This process of documentary-enabled revision can help students expand their toolkits and hone their craft as writers, and experience a greater sense of ownership of their own work.

After becoming familiar with documentary techniques, students can screen – or re-screen – documentary films for inspiration as they revise investigative essays on a wide range of contemporary issues such as gun control, the politics of agribusiness and the limits of free speech. Engaging with visual media can free up writers to imagine their pieces quite differently with a mixture of both distance and engagement. Identifying the elements of effective storytelling and argument across media genres can help them become more skilled and confident writers who can successfully address different types of audiences. They may also be able to think more flexibly about how to work with instructor comments and suggestions in revision.

In addition, they may also engage in both conscious and subconscious ways with their own material when viewing another art form. Ernest Hemingway, for example, during his years in Paris, inspired his own writing through studying the art of Paul Cezanne in museums and galleries. Regularly viewing Cezanne's paintings influenced the structure of Hemingway's short stories and enabled him to craft more powerful sentences. More generally, these intense encounters with Cezanne's art also nurtured Hemingway's literary expression on a more intuitive level (Gehlawat).

After completing an initial draft of an investigative essay, students face multiple revision tasks: how to refine introductions and conclusions, provide sufficient historical context, effectively sequence the presentation of information and arguments, transition smoothly between sections of an essay, choose relevant sources and use them effectively and edit their prose for clarity, brevity and grace. Throughout the essay revision process, high quality documentaries, such as those screened on PBS's *The American Experience* and *Frontline*, can serve as models of how to introduce a controversy to an audience, organize and present information, integrate the voices of sources, generate clear and dynamic prose and conclude dynamically. PBS and other documentary producers, such as the Media Education Foundation, also publish material on their websites to aid students and teachers in analyzing documentaries. Before revising an essay, students might view a documentary on their own topic or one on a different issue to analyze how the film works and see what they can learn from it as writers.

Introductions, especially in research essays, pose a serious challenge for student writers who wish to engage a public readership and expand their sense of audience beyond their instructor and classmates. Documentary filmmakers may consciously address audiences in

introductory sequences through nostalgic or arresting images that foreshadow the theme of the film. For example, Robert Kenner's *Food, Inc.* previews its major theme by juxtaposing nostalgic visuals – of golden fields of corn and appealing food marketing images of family farms – with journalist Michael Pollan's voice-over of reality. Pollan reminds viewers, as they travel visually down the aisles of a large modern supermarket whose food packaging evokes a rural utopia, that the golden era of small family farming in the U.S. has morphed into the age of agribusiness whose practices are often far from healthy. Filmmaker Kenner sees himself as lifting the “veil” (a recurrent image in *Food, Inc.*) on industrial food practices, such as CAFOS (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations); the introduction establishes that theme through image and sound.

In a slightly different approach, Adriana Barbaro and Jeremy Earp's *Consuming Kids* opens with a sequence of two disturbing black and white images implicitly critiquing a society that normalizes “cradle-to-grave” marketing. First, appears a sentence: “The consumer embryo begins to develop within the first year of existence”, its white text starkly positioned against a black background. Following this quotation we see a blurred, grainy fetal sonogram; both images are overlaid with an eerie track of swooshing, oceanic womb sounds. This set of images prepares the viewer for the film, which exposes the devious ploys of contemporary youth marketers, who try to insinuate their messages into the minds of children from the earliest possible ages. Critically viewing documentaries can stimulate writers to imagine a range of different possibilities for their introductions and choose the approach that seems to best fit their rhetorical purposes and genre of essay.

In addition, documentary voice-overs, which narrate historical or context information,

can educate viewers through concise, clear and jargon-free writing. In films such as *One Woman, One Vote* (Ruth Pollak, 1995) and *Ida B Wells: Passion for Justice* (William Greaves, 1989), for example, voice-over narration, accompanied by relevant images, such as drawings, newspaper clippings and photographs, establishes a historical context for understanding social movements as well as individual activists and leaders.

Organizing and presenting information and arguments more effectively is also a key revision task for student writers, who may initially be most comfortable in the five-paragraph essay form learned in middle school and high school. Viewing a documentary, they can recognize skillful editing within different scenes and effective transitions between sections of the film. *Food, Inc.*, for example, uses subheads (text on screen) to identify different sections of the film, such as “A Cornucopia of Choices” (on the omnipresence of corn in food and other products) and “Unintended Consequences” (on the health risks of industrially-produced food). *One Woman, One Vote* employs a similar approach, titling 16 film segments about the U.S. suffrage movement by time (“Early Years”) and theme (“Hidden Enemy” – on anti-suffragists). As they revise essays, students can ask themselves: “What **needs** to appear in this essay and in what order?”

In addition, students can pose the question: “What information in my essay **seems** superfluous or redundant?” Film editing as a practice mirrors that of essay editing in revision: the filmmaker typically needs to shoot much more material than necessary to eventually create the final cut. A typical one-hour documentary with a run time of about 58 minutes also offers a clear limit on content, much like an essay page limit or word count. Understanding the role of a “jump cut” in film can illuminate how writers might move from relevant point to relevant point, while

deleting or “jumping over” extraneous and unnecessary material.

Deciding on which secondary sources to use and how best to include them is another revision task for students. The role of expert “talking heads” (such as historians, politicians and scientists) in documentaries bears similarity to the function of quotes from secondary sources in essays. These voices narrate historical information, express different viewpoints and provide authority for the filmmaker; secondary sources play a parallel role in essays. In revising, students must decide (a) if they have chosen quotes that best capture an author’s viewpoint succinctly and (b) how to introduce these quotes and place them in relation to other sources; documentaries model this practice well. In both *Food, Inc.* and *Consuming Kids*, for example, viewers encounter the perspectives of scholars, journalists, consumer advocates and industry spokespersons. Thinking of themselves as documentary filmmakers inviting the interpretive voices of scholars into their films often can be empowering for students.

Conclusions, in revision, commonly pose a problem for students, who may often produce clichéd endings in first drafts. Some writers may end an essay, when they reach word and/or page limit, but not conclude the piece in a meaningful way. In contrast, well-crafted documentary conclusions, like introductions, express the filmmaker’s mission and narrative energy in communicating with the audience for the final time. Conclusions and introductions can be screened together as the film’s “bookends” to compare the ways in which the filmmaker first engaged the audience with the choice of final thoughts, advice or questions, depending on the purpose of the film. A key question for students, like filmmakers, is: what are the last ideas that I want my audience to remember and ponder? How do I capture those ideas in powerful words, sounds and/or images?

In a last sequence, some documentaries often rerun certain frames or scenes from the film to emphasize their visual significance and remind viewers of the central themes of the film. Other films, such as *Food, Inc.* conclude with a call to action. Kenner's conclusion aims to counter the film's dystopian aura and affirm the power consumers can have individually and collectively over the production and consumption of their food. As we hear the voice of Bruce Springsteen singing "This Land is Your Land" (Woody Guthrie, 1940), a list of actions appear, black, white and multicolored text against a black background. Among these suggestions/directives are:

"Plant a garden"

"If you say grace, ask for food that will keep us and the planet healthy."

"Read labels."

"Every one has the right to healthy food. Make sure your local farmers' market takes food stamps"

The last question "Hungry for change?" directs the viewer to the *Food, Inc.* website, which provides additional resources and ideas for action.

Documentaries have distinct conclusion styles, prompting students to ponder what type of ending would best suit their essays. A persuasive documentary may end with a call to action, while a more educational film will typically raise key questions or remind viewers of the major issues or debates portrayed in the film. In general, however, documentary film conclusions tend to transcend summary to also inspire continued reflection. Film credits, like a "Works Cited" page, remind students of the value of acknowledging those whose work they have drawn upon in an essay and whose intellectual conversations they have joined.

Through the process of documentary-enabled revision, a student writer may be inspired to improve an essay by adding graphic material, such as documentary photographs, maps, graphs or timelines. These supplemental graphic materials often improve the quality of the essay and make it more accessible to a wider audience. However, the aim of this revision approach is not for students to produce their own documentaries (although some may choose to do that in other courses). Rather, the goal is for student authors to employ visual media to inspire them to revise print texts in imaginative and comprehensive ways.

Through this approach to revision, we also aim to teach for transfer, so that students can take and adapt the process model of pre-writing, drafting and revision from foundational courses into more advanced classes. Analyzing documentary films as an aspect of essay revision can be a very helpful and liberating practice for students, as they expand their writing toolkit, improve their skills, increase their enjoyment of the craft of writing and have greater ownership of their work. As instructors, we often stress the importance of students “reading as writers” and assign print texts to help them expand their writerly repertoire. It is also highly valuable for writing teachers to emphasize the value of “viewing as writers”, exploring the ways in which decoding visual texts, such as documentary films, can help our students grow as writers. In an ever-expanding multimedia age, this approach in composition pedagogy seems particularly suited to our time.

## Works Cited

Barbaro, Adriana and Jeremy Earp. *Consuming Kids: The Commercialization of Childhood*, Northampton. Ma. Media Education Foundation, 2009. Film.

Elbow, Peter. "Three Levels of Revising", in Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff, *Being a Writer: A Community of Writers Revisited*, 2003. Print.

Gehlawat, Monica. "Painterly Ambitions: Hemingway, Cézanne, and the Short Story". *Journal of the Short Story in English*, 49, 2007. Print. <https://journals.openedition.org/jsse/829>.

Greaves, William. *Ida B. Wells: Passion for Justice*, 1989. San Francisco: California Newsreel. Film.

Kenner, Robert. *Food, Inc.* Los Angeles: Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2008. Film.

Pollak, Ruth. *One Woman, One Vote*. 1995. Film.

Rich, Adrienne. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision". *College English*, Vol. 34, No. 1, *Women, Writing and Teaching* (Oct., 1972), pp. 18-30. National Council of Teachers of English. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/375215>.