

# Shaping the Story: Understanding Perspective, Voice, and Framing in Documentaries

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Some documentaries feel difficult to use in today's classroom.

The pacing may be slow. The visuals may not match what students are used to seeing. Reenactments can feel outdated, and narration may come across as overly formal or disconnected from students' experiences. It can be tempting to set these resources aside in favor of newer, more engaging content.

But these same characteristics can make documentaries powerful tools for analysis, if they are used intentionally.

Rather than focusing on how a documentary looks or sounds, it is useful to consider how it tells a story. Documentaries influence understanding through choices about perspective, voice, and framing. These choices influence what is emphasized, how events are described, and how viewers interpret what they see.

When students begin to examine these elements, viewing shifts from judging a documentary's style to analyzing how meaning is constructed.

When students examine these choices closely, documentaries become opportunities for historical interpretation and evidence analysis rather than passive viewing experiences.

## **Perspective: Who is Represented**

Every documentary reflects perspective.

Perspective refers to the viewpoints that are included, emphasized, or excluded in the telling of a story. In historical documentaries, perspective is often shaped by:

- The individuals or groups featured
- The experiences that are highlighted
- The voices that are absent

Some documentaries present multiple perspectives, while others center a single viewpoint. Even when multiple voices are included, they may not be given equal weight.

For students, recognizing perspective means asking:

- Whose story is being told?

- Whose story is missing?
- How might different groups interpret this event differently?

Understanding perspective helps students see that historical narratives are not fixed. They are influenced by choices about representation. Perspective helps students recognize whose experiences are represented, while voice helps students examine how those experiences are communicated to viewers.

### **Voice: Who is Speaking**

While perspective shapes whose experiences are represented, voice shapes how those experiences are communicated to viewers.

Voice is how information is delivered and who delivers it. In documentaries, voice may appear through:

- Narration
- Interviews
- First-person accounts
- Reenactments

The narrator often plays a powerful role in guiding interpretation. Tone, word choice, and emphasis can influence how viewers understand an event. Even subtle differences in language can shift meaning, especially when a narrator presents one interpretation more confidently than another.

For example, a narrator might describe a group as “defenders” or as “agitators.” Both descriptions refer to people taking action but each frames the action differently.

Students can analyze voice by asking:

- Who is speaking in this documentary?
- How does the narrator describe events or groups?
- What tone is used to present information?

Recognizing voice helps students understand that language plays a powerful role in shaping interpretation. Beyond perspective and voice, documentaries also shape meaning through the way events are organized and presented.

### **Framing: How the Story is Told**

Framing influences how a story is organized, presented, and understood by the viewer.

Documentaries frame historical events through:

- The order in which information is presented
- The use of visuals and music
- The selection of details
- The connections made between events

Framing can influence what viewers see as important and how they interpret the significance of events. It can also shape how viewers understand cause and effect, even when that relationship is not directly stated.

For example:

- Beginning a story with conflict emphasizes tension
- Ending with a resolution suggests closure
- Highlighting certain events while minimizing others affects interpretation

Students can analyze framing by asking:

- How does the structure of this clip influence what seems most important?
- What details are emphasized, and how do they shape understanding?
- What connections are being made between events?
- What might be missing from this account?

For example, dramatic music, rapid pacing, or repeated imagery may encourage viewers to interpret an event as urgent, dangerous, or heroic.

Through framing, documentaries guide interpretation without always making that guidance obvious.

### **What This Looks Like in Practice**

Consider a documentary segment describing a conflict during Reconstruction.

One voice describes a group as restoring order, while another describes the same actions as violent intimidation. The narrator connects these events to political change, emphasizing instability and conflict.

In this example:

- Perspective is reflected in how different groups describe the same event
- Voice is evident in the language used to describe those actions
- Framing is shaped by how the events are organized and connected

Although the same event is being presented, these elements guide the viewer toward a particular interpretation. This is often the moment when students realize they are not just watching history, they are interpreting it.

## How These Elements Work Together

Perspective, voice, and framing do not operate independently. They work together to shape meaning.

A documentary might:

- Use narration (voice) to describe an event
- Include certain viewpoints (perspective)
- Organize events in a way that suggests a particular interpretation (framing)

Together, these choices shape interpretation by influencing what viewers notice, question, and ultimately understand about the past.

When students recognize how these elements interact, they begin to see documentaries as arguments rather than simply presentations of information.

## From Viewing to Analysis

Teaching students to identify perspective, voice, and framing does not require extensive materials or long viewing sessions. Short clips can be used effectively when paired with focused questions such as:

- How is the group being described?
- Who is speaking, and how does that influence understanding?
- What is emphasized in this clip?
- How does the way this story is told influence what the viewer is expected to believe?
- How might this event be presented differently from another perspective?

These questions shift viewing from observation to analysis. Students begin evaluating how documentaries guide interpretation rather than simply identifying information presented on screen. These types of questions also encourage students to investigate what additional perspectives, evidence, or interpretations might deepen understanding.

## Classroom Application

Teachers can incorporate this approach into instruction using a simple routine:

### 1. Select a Short Clip

Choose a segment that includes narration, multiple voices, or clear storytelling choices.

## **2. Focus on One Element**

Direct students to examine perspective, voice, or framing rather than all three at once. Focusing on one element at a time helps students develop deeper analysis without becoming overwhelmed.

## **3. Guide Analysis with Questions**

Ask students to identify how the documentary presents information.

## **4. Extend Thinking**

Have students consider how the story might change if told from a different perspective.

This approach keeps the focus on thinking rather than content coverage.

## **Key Takeaway**

Documentaries do not simply present historical events. They influence how viewers interpret the past through perspective, voice, and framing.

## **Conclusion**

When students learn to analyze perspective, voice, and framing, they begin to recognize that documentaries are not neutral accounts of the past. They are constructed narratives shaped by choices about representation, language, and emphasis.

This understanding allows students to move beyond viewing documentaries as sources of information and toward evaluating them as sources of evidence. In doing so, students move beyond passive viewing and toward questioning how historical meaning is shaped, interpreted, and understood.