Witness: The documentary as testimony and argument

NBE3U, Unit 6: Signal and Story, Lesson 5. 75 minutes. Teacher lesson plan.

Lesson at a glance

Indigenous documentary makers use the camera as a witness: to record what official histories leave out and to put community voices at the centre. Analysing their techniques shows how a documentary can be both testimony and argument.

What students do: Students learn about documentary conventions, view a teacher-chosen excerpt from a documentary by a First Nations, Métis or Inuit filmmaker (for example, Alanis Obomsawin, Tasha Hubbard, Alethea Arnaquq-Baril or Katherena Vermette), analyse its techniques and perspective, and evaluate how effectively it communicates its argument.

Curriculum expectations

Code	Students will…
E2.2	identify conventions and/or techniques used in a variety of media forms and explain, with increasing insight, how they convey meaning and influence their audience in the context of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures
E1.3	evaluate how effectively information, themes, ideas, issues, and opinions are communicated in media texts from First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, and, as appropriate, relevant media texts from non-Indigenous sources, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, and decide whether the texts achieve their intended purpose
E1.5	identify the perspectives and/or biases evident in media texts from First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, and, as appropriate, relevant media texts from non-Indigenous sources, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, and comment on any questions they may raise about beliefs, values, identity, and power
B2.7	analyse oral texts from and/or related to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures, including increasingly complex or difficult texts, focusing on the ways in which they communicate information, themes, ideas, and issues and influence the listener's/viewer's response

From The Ontario Curriculum, Grades 9 to 12: First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Studies (2019), English: Understanding Contemporary First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Voices, Grade 11, University Preparation (NBE3U). A = First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Perspectives and Text Forms in Canada, B = Oral Communication, C = Reading and Literature Studies, D = Writing, E = Media Studies.

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Learning goals and success criteria

Learning goals	Success criteria
• We are learning how documentaries use conventions to witness and to argue. • We are learning to evaluate a documentary's perspective and effectiveness.	• I can identify documentary conventions and explain how they create meaning. • I can identify the filmmaker's perspective and how it shapes the film. • I can evaluate how effectively the documentary communicates its argument. • I can respond respectfully to testimony.

Materials and preparation

- **Slides:** Witness deck.
- **Handouts:** Documentary Toolkit (page 1), Evaluation (page 2).
- **Media:** A teacher-chosen excerpt (10 to 15 minutes) from NFB Indigenous Cinema (nfb.ca/indigenous-cinema). Options include Alanis Obomsawin (Abenaki), Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance (1993); Tasha Hubbard (Cree), nîpawistamâsowin: We Will Stand Up (2019); a documentary by Alethea Arnaquq-Baril (Inuk); Katherena Vermette (Red River Métis), this river (2016). Preview carefully.

Lesson sequence

Time (min)	Part	Teacher	Students	Look for
0–8	**Care**	Before we watch.	Listen.	
8–20	**Conventions**	The documentary toolkit.	Note.	
20–45	**Viewing**	Excerpt.	Watch and note.	Conventions identified.
45–62	**Perspective**	Whose film?	Analyse.	Perspective explained.
62–75	**Evaluate**	Does it work?	Write.	

Differentiation

- **Support:** Toolkit with one example per convention.
- **ELL:** Captioned excerpt; sentence frames for evaluation.
- **Challenge:** Compare two documentaries by different filmmakers on related topics.

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Assessment

Type	Tool	Purpose
Assessment for learning	Documentary Toolkit and Evaluation	Conventions (E2.2), effectiveness (E1.3), perspective (E1.5) and analysis of oral texts (B2.7)

Witness: key points

- **Interview:** Lets people speak in their own words; choose who speaks and in what order.
- **Archival footage:** Brings the past in; can be reframed against its original purpose.
- **Observational footage:** Watching events unfold; the camera as witness.
- **Narration:** The filmmaker's voice guiding interpretation; sometimes the filmmaker is present on screen.
- **Perspective:** The filmmaker's relationship to the community shapes access, trust and what is shown.
- **Evaluation:** A documentary can be openly argumentative and still be careful with evidence; judge both.

Teacher notes

- Several of these documentaries deal with violence, death, grief and injustice (for example, nîpawistamâsowin centres on the family of Colten Boushie after his death in 2016; this river follows families searching for missing loved ones in Winnipeg). Name the content beforehand, choose a non-graphic excerpt and give care routines. This course discusses colonization, residential schools and their effects. Some students and families carry this history personally. Support: Hope for Wellness Help Line (for Indigenous people across Canada, 24/7, by phone or online chat at hopeforwellness.ca; English and French, with Cree, Ojibway and Inuktut on request at certain times), 1-855-242-3310; Kids Help Phone, 1-800-668-6868 or text 686868; 9-8-8 Suicide Crisis Helpline (call or text 988); National Indian Residential School Crisis Line, 1-866-925-4419.
- Treat interviews with family members and community members as testimony: students analyse the filmmaker's choices, not whether the speakers' grief or experiences are valid.
- Titles and dates: Kanehsatake (NFB, 1993) and nîpawistamâsowin (NFB, 2019) are in the course's vetted list; Katherena Vermette's documentary this river premiered in 2016 (The Canadian Encyclopedia). Confirm availability on NFB Indigenous Cinema.
- Preview every clip, episode or post before class. Choose excerpts that are short, non-graphic and suitable for your students; check your board's approved media list.
- Do not ask Indigenous students to speak for their communities, to share personal or family histories, or to act as experts. Every student's participation in sharing is optional.

Coming up

Lesson 6, Sound and Language.

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