



INTERNATIONAL DOCUMENTARY  
CHALLENGE

## Classroom Guide

Dear Educator,

We are delighted that you have decided to bring the [International Documentary Challenge](#) into your classroom. This Doc Challenge Classroom Guide is intended to help you prepare your students in a wide range of classroom settings to participate in the Doc Challenge and lead a class discussion regarding their experience. We have also provided some suggested activities and homework assignments based on the common lessons learned by doing the Doc Challenge. The Doc Challenge is ideal for Digital Filmmaking and Video Production Classes. It is recommended for high school and college students as well as community media, media arts or art institute classes.

The International Documentary Challenge is a timed filmmaking competition where filmmakers have 5 days to make a short non-fiction film (4-7 minutes.) All of the registered participants make their films during the same time period (early March) and are required to ship the movie by the deadline. In addition to being restricted on time, the filmmakers must choose between 2 assigned documentary genres (such as Biography, Music, 1st Person, etc.) and are assigned a specific theme (such as "Freedom") that will dictate the content and direction of their film. The top 12 films (determined by a panel of judges) premiere at the Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Film Festival in Toronto where the Winners are announced. After the premiere, there are additional theatrical screenings in major cities, possible television exposure and a DVD release of the best films.

The mission of The International Documentary Challenge is to encourage documentary filmmakers to create and to give those filmmakers an international platform to showcase their talents. The feedback we've received is that the "challenge" is an exhilarating experience for the students that helps them focus in a new and effective way. Initially it seems like a ridiculous notion to think of completing a film in such a short time, but that, in essence, is the point of this competition - to encourage filmmakers to work straight from their gut, make quick decisions and finish a creative project under pressure. When making a film in a few days, one learns a lot about what is and isn't important in filmmaking - lessons that will never be forgotten.

If you have not already done so, in order to obtain the rights to use the Doc Challenge in your classroom, please purchase an educational copy of the Best of the Doc Challenge DVD through our distributor, Typecast Releasing, at [www.typecastfilms.com](http://www.typecastfilms.com). To register your class for the Doc Challenge go to [www.docchallenge.org](http://www.docchallenge.org).

Doug Whyte  
Doc Challenge Founder and Producer

*This guide is intended for use in a variety of types of classrooms; please choose the questions and topics that best suit the needs of your students.*

**► LEARNING OBJECTIVES ADDRESSED**

1. Students gain exposure to real world filming situations, including deadlines, fiscal constraints, and legal issues.
2. Students must collaborate and work as a team to finish the film on time, allowing them to gain practical firsthand knowledge of working as a film crew to complete a project. These skills are invaluable and easily transferable to others areas of media production and working in today's society.
3. Project management, including attention to detail, budgeting, managing a crew and workflow, as well as time management are implicit in every role of a successful crew completing the Doc Challenge.
4. Students learn to negotiate, think critically, plan, and adapt quickly to changing circumstances. Invariably, problems will arise and students must problem-solve and respond quickly to keep the production from spiraling out of control.
5. Because the timeframe in which the film is made is so short, students learn the importance of crafting a film with a clear and simple message.
6. Students learn how to quickly make an assessment of the work (both in production and post-production), come to a decision and move on without looking back. They need to shed all of the expectations from pre-production or "babies" from post-production, in service to a better story.
7. Most students understand the importance of production hierarchy, but this experience will definitely reaffirm it for them. The Director and Producer are the go-to people for story and production concerns and this helps with managing the speed at which decisions have to be made.
8. Students learn to ask for what they want and people may say "No," but they may also say, "Yes." Students learn to "go for it" even if they feel intimidated or not up to the challenge.

## ► QUESTIONS ADDRESSED BY PARTICIPATING IN THE DOC CHALLENGE

1. What is involved in planning a successful production?
2. What kind of back-up plans are necessary to complete a documentary film?
3. What are the roles and duties involved in making a documentary film and why is it important to make these clear at the beginning of the production?
4. What kinds of research and interview skills are necessary to get the footage needed from a subject for a documentary?
5. How do I create a timeline and assign duties to make sure that a film is made within 5 days?
6. What to do if a crew member bails out or equipment fails?
7. How do I take the footage I have and craft a clear story and message from it?
8. What techniques are involved in documentary filmmaking to set different tones?
9. What makes a documentary fascinating to the public?
10. What additional duties do a director and a producer have when trying to complete a film in such a short timeframe?

## ► ACTIVITIES

### **Before the Doc Challenge**

1. Watch and critique the films on the Best of the Doc Challenge DVD. Lead a class discussion analyzing story, production values and effective use of the genre and theme. Have students write a compare/contrast essay of 2 films from the DVD.
2. Organize the class into production teams. Depending on the scope of the brainstormed ideas, it is recommended that each team should have from 5 to 10 crew members. Prepare and administer a crew position survey where students may rate the available jobs. Assign the students to the positions based on this survey and on your knowledge of their temperament and skill set.
3. Brainstorm: Run through each genre and come up with 3 potential ideas for each. Interrogate the ideas that emerge from these sessions for their feasibility, their ability to satisfy the possible approaches that may be required, and their flexibility in terms of angle so that the assigned theme has a better chance of being accommodated.

## ► **ACTIVITIES (Cont.)**

### **The Doc Challenge**

See [www.docchallenge.org](http://www.docchallenge.org) for all of the parameters, rules and paperwork.

### **After the Doc Challenge**

1. Screen the film for the student body as well as friends and family of the students. After the screening have the students do a Q&A about their experience making the film.
2. Respond through writing and discussion to the Doc Challenge experience, communicating what lessons were learned and how they will incorporate this information in their future productions.

## ► **TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL DOC CHALLENGE EXPERIENCE**

1. Line up potential sources of original music early.
2. Give the appointed Director final say in selecting a topic to avoid morning-of-the-contest debate sessions.
3. Reserve equipment in advance.
4. Figure out where the funding for the project is coming from. If not all of the funding can be secured prior to the shoot, come to a decision as a group about how expenses will be handled.
5. Arrange the post-production facilities/office in advance and outfit it with the necessary supplies and equipment. 24-hour access is key.
6. Be present during the shoot from time-to-time. Being available at all times by text message may be a good idea for story ideas that involve rigorous production environments where students may need some advising.
7. Don't wait until production is over to media log, capture, and media manage! Ideally, footage should be delivered to an editor directly after it is shot so they can start working on it. Good media management should be a priority for the sake of efficiency and to allow multiple editors to work on the project.
8. Don't hover unless the students ask you to. That said, being present for fine cutting and picture lock is recommended.

9. Have back-up plans for equipment failure, loss of subjects, and crew backing out. An event like this is all about *planning*.
10. Remember that the deadline is only a date, not a time. Most US Post Offices have a location (usually at the airport) that remains open until midnight.
11. Make sure that your film somehow addresses the theme you were assigned. You can feature the theme with a single reference or question, or you can make the theme the center of your entire film. Either way is fine, but if the judges can find no reference to the theme in your film, your team will be disqualified from the International Documentary Challenge competition.
12. Don't be afraid to edit your film. Many teams err by using the entire 7 minutes allotted, when their stories could have been told more effectively in shorter time. Films with a run-time of five minutes or less often have a better market value than longer films.
13. Encourage your students to trust themselves in terms of both storytelling and technical considerations, and encourage them to avoid overanalyzing the filmmaking process. This is a chance for them to dive in and go with their gut instincts. Expectations will be low for a film made in just 5 days, so there's a good chance expectations will be exceeded!

### ► COMMENTS FROM PAST DOC CHALLENGE CLASS PARTICIPANTS

"I did not give my students enough credit for the amount of hard work they were willing to put into a project. I feel really bad about that because I assumed that maybe it would be too intense, too much of a time commitment, that it would be too much trouble, essentially. And for what reward? I wasn't sure if they would see the benefits. You know what? They did! They grabbed the experience and just totally dove in and really made it something that was valuable to them. And I'm really proud."

--Courtney Hermann, Digital Filmmaking Instructor, Art Institute of Portland

"The Doc Challenge was a life-altering experience for me because prior to the Doc Challenge I thought I was just all about narrative fiction. I had never given documentary filmmaking even a glance. After Doc Challenge I realized just how great documentary filmmaking is. Great because not only are you making a story out of real people and real life experiences, but you have the opportunity to really change the way people see the world. I now focus on non-fiction as opposed to fiction."

--Karlyn Gibson, Student

"I learned so much by doing this challenge that I know I am going to use in my future filmmaking projects. You do the best that you can with what you've got in the time that you have and you make whatever situation you're given work!"

--Liz Vice, Student