



JOUR 521: Documentary Pre-Production **2 Units**

Fall 2017 — Tuesdays (beginning Oct. 17) — 2- 5:20 p.m.

Section: 21525D

Location: ANN 210

Instructor: Professor Daniel Birman

Office: ANN 205A

Office Hours: Tuesdays, 8-9 a.m., and by appointment

Contact Info: birman@asc.usc.edu, 213.821.1131 (office), 818.434.4300 (cell)

Production Coach: Megan Chao

Office: ANN 204F

Office Hours: By appointment

Contact Info: megan.chao@usc.edu, 661.992.0925 (cell), Skype / Google Talk: megan.chao

I. Course Description

JOUR 521 is a pre-production class designed to prepare students for a documentary / longform project. Students learn to shape and pitch marketable ideas, conduct in-depth and journalistically-sound research, identify visual elements and sequences, build a realistic production schedule, and present the material in a manner consistent with best practices in the industry.

The key to success begins with an understanding on what it takes to make a nonfiction program feasible. Students learn about pitching ideas that can play in different media, from digital to broadcast, and create sales tools necessary to meet marketplace demands. They evaluate real-world examples to better understand how programs are pitched, shaped and subsequently constructed. They also see why they work – or in most cases – don't.

This class gives students time to develop a story that is engaging, relevant, and effective. Critical to this course is the notion that an idea, on its own, is rarely sufficient to convince a buyer to commission a story, be it for a longform news story, newsmagazine or documentary.

Longform storytelling demands that a story have an angle that is distinctive and interesting. Then, coupled with a journalism model, it becomes a logical story arc that is clear and accessible, that can be delivered in a reasonable amount of time. It also has elements that can sustain a target audience. This is not an exercise in observational filmmaking. Rather, this course equips the student with an approach that is repeatable for any subject matter and for any platform from the very basic online presentation to the more demanding broadcast arena.

Target market/platform is another critical aspect of the course. Students research market options for a story, and then shape their projects to meet the needs of that market. The research and preparation makes it possible for students to move into production with much more confidence and to anticipate the look of a documentary before any work is done with a camera.

Production concepts are taught as a means to achieve visual literacy – the interpretation of a visual setting, the translation into visual sequences, and the story that can be told as a result. It becomes the research basis for the project and teaches journalistic core values related to the making of longform stories.

II. Overall Learning Objectives and Assessment

Students taking JOUR 521:

- Research ideas that can be produced within a semester
- Pitch a story idea
- Compile relevant research materials
- Locate experts who will participate in a documentary project
- Learn basic concepts of visual literacy
- Pre-interview experts
- Create a sizzle reel and one-sheet pitch document
- Develop a game plan to hit the ground running in JOUR 522

The final output from JOUR 521 is a pitch document, a sizzle reel, and a creative approach articulated in a final presentation that can be successfully executed. This work is the precursor to JOUR 522, the documentary production class.

III. Description of Assignments

- **PITCHES** need to be typed out, proofread and checked for grammar. You'll type out a single-paragraph per idea, with two to three ideas total. Turn in hard copy printouts as instructed in the course schedule. You'll also need to prepare a verbal pitch in class that does not exceed two minutes in length.
- **RESEARCH:** You should be able to demonstrate an ability to conduct in-depth research with legitimate and reliable sources. Journal articles, feature stories, etc. Wikipedia is not a source. Think of big picture concepts in connection with your story – e.g. If you're producing a story about earthquakes in southern California, you need to cite statistics from the USGS about how many earthquakes happen in the region, how often, etc. The research helps you build a case for:
 - **Production Elements** – the elements you plan to use for your documentary. Where you wish to shoot, what you expect to see, the experts you intend to interview, the topics you intend to cover, and the sequences you hope to capture. Include photos if possible.
 - **Experts & Profiles** – descriptions and brief bios of each person to be profiled in the story and how they will be used, and possible visual sequences with the expert. Include photos if possible.
- **ONE-SHEET:** The final, official pitch document, which has evolved significantly from the original soft pitch. A concise and engaging write-up about your project identifying the narrative, the visual elements and people you researched over the course of the semester.
- **SIZZLE REEL:** A 2-3 minute video proof-of-concept for your pitch. This is to give us a sense of your vision, the characters, the story and the elements you hope to expand on, if someone were to "buy" your project.

IV. Grading

a. Breakdown of Grade

Assignment	% of Grade
Pitches	15
Camera workshop attendance	10
Final presentation	20
Final one-sheet pitch document	25
Final sizzle reel	30
TOTAL	100%

b. Grading Scale

The following is the grade scale that I use to assign letter grades. **It is up to you to keep track of your grades and to make an appointment with me to discuss any concerns you might have.** We will have a mid-course evaluation to let you know where you stand.

95 to 100: A	70 to less than 75: C+	45 to less than 50: D-
90 to less than 95: A-	65 to less than 70: C	0 to less than 45: F
85 to less than 90: B+	60 to less than 65: C-	
80 to less than 85: B	55 to less than 60: D+	
75 to less than 80: B-	50 to less than 55: D	

c. Grading Standards

All assignments will be edited on a professional basis and you will be judged first on the accuracy, fairness and objectivity of your stories. You will then be evaluated for broadcast style, editing, production value, originality and the ability to meet deadlines.

An **"A"** grade means that the student has a full grasp of the concept and is doing exceptional work. Work is completed on time with minimal amount of editing required to complete the task. The grade demands that students exhibit professionalism.

A **"B"** grade means that the student understands and executes the work on time. There may be more extensive editing needed to complete the work, it is clear that the student grasps the concepts and exhibits professionalism.

A **"C"** grade means that the student completes the work with a minimal amount of effort. The work is done, but requires a fair amount of editing. It is clear that the student might not have done in-depth research, and the assignment does not meet professional standards.

A **"D"** grade requires excessive rewriting, has numerous errors and should not have been submitted. Work is unsatisfactory or fails to show important elements.

An “F” grade means you’ve failed to meet the major criteria of the assignment, are late, have numerous errors or both. Your writing should not contain any errors in spelling, style, grammar and facts. Accuracy is the first law of journalism. The following are some other circumstances that would warrant a grade of “F” and potential USC/Annenberg disciplinary action:

- Fabricating a story or making up quotes or information.
- Plagiarizing a script/article, part of a script/article or information from any source.
- Staging video or telling interview subjects what to say.
- Using video shot by someone else and presenting it as original work.
- Shooting video in one location and presenting it as another location.
- Using the camcorder to intentionally intimidate, provoke or incite a person or a group of people to elicit more “dramatic” video.
- Promising, paying or giving someone something in exchange for doing an interview either on or off camera.
- Missing a deadline.

V. Assignment Submission Policy

- A. All assignments are due on the dates specified. Lacking prior discussion and agreement with the instructor, late assignments will automatically be given a grade of F.
- B. Written assignments must be submitted via e-mail to the instructor per guidelines outlined in class.
- C. Video edits must be exported as QuickTime movies and submitted through **Xchange**. We will provide training on the system. For technical issues, please contact Victor Figueroa, the Media Center’s Production Supervisor at vfiguero@asc.usc.edu.

VI. Required Readings and Supplementary Materials

REFERENCES:

Through observation (critiquing existing shows), organization, and test shooting, you’ll begin to learn the secrets to longform storytelling. In addition to the semester’s work, the following may give you an even greater understanding of the history behind documentary television and the work that goes into creating it.

- Book: Bernard, Sheila Curran, *Documentary Storytelling: Making Stronger More Dramatic Nonfiction Films*.
- Prior work by students: *Impact*, USC Annenberg’s award-winning student-produced newsmagazine series. <http://www.uscannenbergmedia.com/category/watch/impact>

VII. Laptop Policy

All undergraduate and graduate Annenberg majors and minors are required to have a PC or Apple laptop that can be used in Annenberg classes. Please refer to the [Annenberg Virtual Commons](#) for more information. To connect to USC’s Secure Wireless network, please visit USC’s [Information Technology Services](#) website.

Add/Drop Dates for Session 166 (7 weeks: 10.16.2017 – 12.13.2017)

- **Monday, October 16:** First day of classes
- **Monday, October 23:** Last day to add
- **Monday, October 23:** Last day to drop without a mark of “W” and receive a refund
- **Friday, November 3:** Last day to drop without a mark of “W” on transcript or change pass/no pass to letter grade
- **Tuesday, November 28:** Last day to drop with a mark of “W”
- **Wednesday, December 13:** End of session

VIII. Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

Important note to students: Be advised that this syllabus is subject to change based on the progress of the class, news events, and/or guest speaker availability. **Since this class is only seven weeks, it is expected that students will be on time and attend all sessions. The only devices allowed in the class are those that are used for notetaking. I will not tolerate attending to email and social media addiction during class.**

<u>Week</u>	
1 10.17.2017	INTRODUCTIONS <u>Lecture: Understanding Documentary and Longform</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Realms of nonfiction television▪ Journalism and integrity as a longform practice▪ Passion and creativity behind the craft▪ Taking the timeliness out of newsworthy events▪ The power of multimedia for longform Finding the Story and Crafting a Soft Pitch <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Crafting viable story ideas for decision-makers▪ Access and feasibility for execution▪ Thinking about the audience▪ How to write it up and make the verbal presentation▪ Understanding that your idea isn't the first to be told, nor the last <u>Assignments:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Preliminary research on two to three producible ideas (one primary, others as alternates). Write one paragraph for each idea. Turn in hard copy in class next week.- Be prepared to soft pitch ideas in class next week.

Week

2
10.24.2017

**** DUE: PITCHES (written and verbal). HARD COPIES DUE IN CLASS.**

PITCH SESSION

Lecture: Story Development

- So your pitch made it past the first round – *now what?*
- Building the case for a documentary project – choosing an appropriate platform
- Distilling the big pitch idea into key topics for research
- Pre-interviewing – approaching subjects and experts, questions to ask, taking notes and the power of listening
- Finding credible resources

Assignments:

- Begin research on your approved story idea.
- Identify a possible platform for your video – make the case based on the platform’s history.

3
10.31.2017

IN-CLASS DISCUSSION: Your pitch + platform

Lecture: The Power of Research in Longform Storytelling

- The importance of organization in research and how to keep track of mass volumes of information
- How in-depth to go for a pitch
- Making lists: people, places, topics, possible interview questions
- Statistics, accuracy of information and thinking critically

Lecture: Writing a One-Sheet

- Expansion of your verbal pitch
- Describing the sequences that tell your story
- Looking for details that reveal character, purpose, context and relevance
- What’s the narrative? Having a beginning, middle and end to your story
- Understanding the role of a spine sequence and supporting sequences

Assignment:

- Pre-production: begin gaining access to locations, characters and experts.
- Continue research on your story.

Week

4

11.07.2017

Lecture: Basic video production techniques

- How to use a camera to capture ideas
- Cinematography techniques that work even for the most basic of cameras
- Getting a variety of shots and angles: wide shots, medium shots, close-ups, cutaways, etc.
- Audio basics
- Pre-production interview: Getting enough material without spoiling the bigger project

Assignment:

- Continue research on your story and start writing your one-sheet.
- Start filming.

5

11.14.2017

Lecture: The Sizzle Reel

- A 2-3 minute stand-alone video as a proof-of-concept to a client
- Establishing a creative vision for the project before it's sold
- Making it count – teasing the most interesting elements of your story without giving it all away. The “*tell me more*” effect.
- Utilizing available tools and resources to bring a creative vision to life

Assignment:

- Begin shooting for your sizzle reel.
- Continue work on your one-sheet.

6

11.21.2017

Lecture: Visual Literacy

- Thinking visually: avoiding see-and-say
- Deconstructing the elements: people, locations, actualities, topics & questions
- Making creative choices: verité, narrated, fast-paced, etc.
- Identifying the main elements in your story
- Setting the right tone for your subject
- Thinking ahead: now that you have a better sense of your story, how do you envision your completed project?

Assignment:

- Continue working on your presentation, one-sheet and sizzle reel.

Week

7

11.28.2017

INDIVIDUAL STUDENT MEETINGS

Lecture: Current state of nonfiction television & career choices

- The blurring lines between nonfiction and entertainment
- Understanding the marketplace: your ideas v. network interests and competition
- Realities of the industry
- Pitching your ideas: where to go and who to talk with

Assignment:

- Finalize your presentation, one-sheet and sizzle reel.

FINAL

**** DUE: FINAL PITCH, ONE-SHEET AND SIZZLE REEL**

12.07.2017

2 - 4 p.m.

FINAL PRESENTATIONS

- Sizzle reel
- The narrative from beginning to end
 - Potential subjects, locations, topics
 - Your approach to the storytelling – style, creative choices
- Progress so far with access to locations, characters, etc.
- Your game plan for production next semester

IX. Policies and Procedures

Additional Policies

Attendance

Class attendance is *mandatory*. Students are advised to attend the first class meetings of their journalism classes or the instructors may drop them. The School of Journalism adheres to the university policy, which states “an instructor may replace any student who without prior consent does not attend... the first class session of the semester for once-a-week classes. It is then the student’s responsibility to withdraw officially from the course through the Registration Department.”

Internships

The value of professional internships as part of the overall educational experience of our students has long been recognized by the School of Journalism. Accordingly, while internships are not required for successful completion of this course, any student enrolled in this course that undertakes and completes an approved, non-paid internship during this semester shall earn academic extra credit herein of an amount equal to 1 percent of the total available semester points for this course. To receive instructor approval, a student must request an internship letter from the Annenberg Career Development Office and bring it to the instructor to sign by the end of the third week of classes. The student must submit the signed letter to the media organization, along with the evaluation form provided by the Career Development Office. The form should be filled out by the intern supervisor and returned to the instructor at the end of the semester. No credit will be given if an evaluation form is not turned into the instructor by the last day of class. Note: The internship must be unpaid and can only be applied to one journalism class.

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

a. Academic Conduct

Plagiarism

Presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words - is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Section 11, *Behavior Violating University Standards* (<https://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b/>). Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct (<http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct/>).

USC School of Journalism Policy on Academic Integrity

The following is the USC Annenberg School of Journalism’s policy on academic integrity and repeated in the syllabus for every course in the school:

“Since its founding, the USC School of Journalism has maintained a commitment to the highest standards of ethical conduct and academic excellence. Any student found plagiarizing, fabricating, cheating on examinations, and/or purchasing papers or other assignments faces sanctions ranging from an ‘F’ on the assignment to dismissal from the School of Journalism. All academic integrity violations will be reported to the office of Student Judicial Affairs & Community Standards (SJACS), as per university policy, as well as journalism school administrators.”

In addition, it is assumed that the work you submit for this course is work you have produced entirely by yourself, and has not been previously produced by you for submission in another course or Learning Lab, without approval of the instructor.

b. Support Systems

Equity and Diversity

Discrimination, sexual assault, and harassment are not tolerated by the university. You are encouraged to report any incidents to the *Office of Equity and Diversity* (<http://equity.usc.edu/>) or to the *Department of Public Safety* (<http://dps.usc.edu/contact/report/>). This is important for the safety of the whole USC community. Another member of the university community - such as a friend, classmate, adviser, or faculty member - can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. The *Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention and Services* (<https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp/>) provides 24/7 confidential support, and the sexual assault resource center webpage (<https://sarc.usc.edu/>) describes reporting options and other resources.

Support with Scholarly Writing

A number of USC's schools provide support for students who need help with scholarly writing. Check with your adviser or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute* (<http://ali.usc.edu/>) which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students.

The Office of Disability Services and Programs (<http://dsp.usc.edu/>) provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations.

Students requesting test-related accommodations will need to share and discuss their DSP recommended accommodation letter/s with their faculty and/or appropriate departmental contact person at least three weeks before the date the accommodations will be needed. Additional time may be needed for final exams. Reasonable exceptions will be considered during the first three weeks of the semester as well as for temporary injuries and for students recently diagnosed. Please note that a reasonable period of time is still required for DSP to review documentation and to make a determination whether a requested accommodation will be appropriate.

Stress Management

Students are under a lot of pressure. If you start to feel overwhelmed, it is important that you reach out for help. A good place to start is the USC Student Counseling Services office at 213-740-7711. The service is confidential, and there is no charge.

Emergency Information

If an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, *USC Emergency Information* <http://emergency.usc.edu/> will provide safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued by means of Blackboard, teleconferencing, and other technology.

X. About Your Instructor

Daniel H. Birman is a nonfiction television and documentary producer based in Los Angeles. Birman is currently in production on *Sentencing Children*, a feature documentary about juvenile sentencing laws in America and a potential reform effort. This project continues the work of an investigative digital series by the same name, recently completed in partnership with **Independent Lens** and *The Tennessean*. Birman also recently produced *The Hunt for Dark Matter*, a documentary about recent advancements in space exploration, for digital streaming service **CuriosityStream**.

Some notable work includes: *Perfecting Flight*, a feature documentary about legendary aviator Bob Hoover, whose significant contributions to aviation began in WWII. At age 91, he flies for the last time and tells his story. Birman was a contributing producer for *The Big Bang Machine*, a special for **PBS - NOVA** about one of the great scientific discoveries in modern times, the Higgs boson, a tiny particle that explains how the universe was formed. *Chasing Speed: Leslie Porterfield* for **Velocity** is the story about the world's fastest woman on a motorcycle. Birman produced an internationally acclaimed social documentary, *Me Facing Life: Cyntoia's Story* for **PBS - Independent Lens**, which was also featured as part of the ITVS Community Cinema program. Birman wrote, produced, and directed the documentary, *Brace for Impact: the Chesley B. Sullenberger Story* for **TLC** and **Discovery**. Birman also has an extensive body of work producing science and medical programming for cable networks.

His production company, **Birman Productions**, is in development and production on a number of docu-series and specials, including a series based on *The New York Times* Bestsellers list book series, *The Hinges of History*, written by the popular history author, Thomas Cahill.

Birman is also a Professor of Professional Practice at the **USC Annenberg School of Journalism**, where he teaches documentary production and is the Executive Producer of *Impact*, a student-produced long form series at Annenberg.

Additionally, for two decades, Birman served on the Board of Governors for the **Television Academy**, representing the Documentary peer group. He currently serves as chair of the Bylaws and Academy Experience committees.

About Your Production Coach: Megan Chao

Megan Chao is vice president of development and production for Daniel H. Birman Productions, Inc., a media production company based in Los Angeles. In her role, she oversees the logistical operations of the company, from pre-production through production and post-production. She also manages the overall corporate strategy for the company.

Chao joined the company in early 2009 as a researcher on *Brace for Impact: The Chesley B. Sullenberger Story*, a documentary for TLC and Discovery Channel. She quickly rose through the ranks, becoming an award-winning producer and editor (Avid, FCP and Adobe Premiere proficient). She is also a cinematographer (Sony and Canon) and writer. She has a track record of successfully taking shows from development through network delivery.

Chao is an adjunct faculty member at USC's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, and is line producer and online editor for the student-produced television newsmagazine show, *Impact*. She has a master's degree in broadcast journalism from USC Annenberg and dual bachelor's degrees in biology and nonfiction creative writing from the University of California at Riverside.

She is an active member of the Television Academy in the documentary peer group, and is a member of the International Documentary Association.