

JOUR 521: Documentary Pre-Production

2 Units

Fall 2015 — Tuesdays (beginning October 20, 2015) —

2:00 p.m. - 5:10 p.m.

Section: 21518D

Location: ANN 210

Instructor: Professor Daniel Birman

Office: ANN 205A

Office Hours: Tuesdays 8:00 – 9:00 a.m. and by appointment

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Production Coach: Megan Chao

Office: ANN 204F

Office Hours: By appointment

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Skype / Google Talk: megan.chao

I. Course Description

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

The key to success centers on what it takes to make a nonfiction program feasible. Students learn about pitching ideas that can play in different marketplaces, from digital to broadcast. They also participate in critical reviews of recent nonfiction programs in class to better understand how they're constructed and why they work – or in some cases – don't.

This class gives students time to develop a story in ways that are 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, beginning with a journalism model, demands that the story have a logical story arc that is clear and accessible, with 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 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 long form stories.

II. Overall Learning Objectives and Assessment

Students taking JOUR 521:

- Prepare to produce a longform video story
- Research ideas that can be produced within a semester
- Pitch a story idea with a specific placement in mind
- Collect relevant research materials
- Locate experts who can participate in a documentary project
- Pre-interview experts
- Develop a working production schedule for JOUR 522 (the production class)
- Have a game plan in place to hit the ground running in JOUR 522

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

III. Description of Assignments

- **SOFT 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 per pitch session. 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.
- **STORY PRESENTATION:** A presentation with photos and other media demonstrating your story's narrative, with your intended subjects and experts, storytelling devices, style, etc.
- **ONE-SHEET:** The final, official pitch document. 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.
- **PRODUCTION SCHEDULE.** A week-by-week plan on how you will produce and edit the documentary within 15 weeks, to be executed in JOUR 522.

IV. Grading

a. Breakdown of Grade

Assignment	% of Grade
Soft pitches	10
Workshop attendance	10
Final pitch presentation	30
Production schedule	20
One-sheet pitch document	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.**

94 – 100	A
90 – 93	A-
88 – 89	B+
84 – 87	B
80 – 83	B-
78 – 79	C+
74 – 77	C
70 – 73	C-

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.
- 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.

VI. Required Readings and Supplementary Materials

TEXTBOOKS AS REFERENCES:

Through observation (critiquing existing shows), organization, and hands-on producing, you’ll learn the secrets behind longform storytelling. In addition to the semester’s work, the following reading list – available at the bookstore – will give you an even greater understanding of the history behind documentary television and the work that goes into creating it.

- Barnouw, Erik. *Documentary: A History of the Nonfiction Film*
- Rabiger, Michael. *Directing the Documentary*
- Bernard, Sheila Curran, *Documentary Storytelling: Making Stronger More Dramatic Nonfiction Films.*

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: 10.19.2015 – 12.11.2015)

Monday, October 19: First day of classes

Monday, October 26: Last day to add

Monday, October 26: Last day to drop without a mark of “W” and receive a refund

Friday, November 27: Last day to drop with a mark of “W”

Friday, December 11: End of session

VIII. Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

Important note to students: Be advised that this syllabus is subject to change – and probably will change – based on the progress of the class, news events, and/or guest speaker availability.

Week	
1 10.20.2015	<p>INTRODUCTIONS</p> <p>Lecture: Understanding Documentary and Longform</p> <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 <p>Finding the Story and Crafting a Soft Pitch</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Crafting viable story ideas for decision-makers▪ Access and feasibility for execution▪ Thinking about the audience▪ Decisions that set the stage for a documentary▪ How to write it up and make the verbal presentation▪ Understanding that your idea isn't the first to be told, nor the last <p>Assignments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Preliminary research two to three producible ideas (one primary, others 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.
2 10.27.2015	<p>** DUE: SOFT PITCHES (written and verbal). HARD COPIES DUE IN CLASS.</p> <p>PITCH SESSION</p> <p>Lecture: Story Development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ So your pitch got approved – now what?▪ Distilling the big pitch idea into key topics for research▪ Creating the production binder▪ Pre-interviewing – approaching subjects and experts, questions to ask, taking notes and the power of listening▪ Decisions – people, locations, important story beats▪ Vetting ideas▪ Finding credible resources <p>Assignments:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Begin research on your approved story idea.

Week

3

11.03.2015

Lecture: Research

- The importance of organization in research and how to keep track of mass volumes of information
- How in-depth to go with the research
- Making sense of the information and crafting the narrative
- Making lists: people, places, topics, possible interview questions
- Keeping everything organized in a production binder

Assignment:

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

4

11.10.2015

Lecture: Visual Literacy

- What it means organize a longform story for video
- Thinking visually
- Deconstructing the elements: people, locations, actualities, topics & questions
- Pre-production: being prepared, informed and in control
- Identifying the main elements in your story
- Utilizing available tools and resources to bring a creative vision to life
- Identifying stylistic choices: verité style v. written narration
- Setting the right tone for your subject
- Thinking ahead – now that you have a better sense of your story, how to you envision your completed project?

Assignment:

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

5

11.17.2015

Lecture: Writing a One-Sheet

- Expansion of your pitch
- Describing the sequences that tell your story
- Looking for details that reveal character
- Crafting a story arc: beginning, middle, end. What's the narrative?
- Understanding the role of a spine sequence and supporting sequences

Creating a Production / Post-Production Schedule

- Translating your story arc into a viable production schedule
- Find a balance between production and post-production (editing)
- Anticipating pick-up shoots / problems – being prepared to solve them
- How to know that you're going to get what you hope to get
- What to expect for JOUR 522: how to get it all done in 15 weeks
- Having a realistic sense of your workload and time commitments

Assignment:

- Begin working on your final pitch presentation, your one-sheet and your production schedule.

Week

6

11.24.2015

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
- What it means to work in longform
- How class projects can help you find work
- Industry feedback

Assignment:

- Finalize your presentation, one-sheet and production schedule.

7

12.01.2015

**** DUE: FINAL PITCH, ONE-SHEET and PRODUCTION SCHEDULE**

FINAL PITCH PRESENTATIONS

- The narrative from beginning to end
 - Subjects, locations, topics
 - Your approach to the storytelling – style, creative choices
- Progress so far with access to locations, characters, etc.
- Game plan for production

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://scampus.usc.edu/b/11-00-behavior-violating-university-standards-and-appropriate-sanctions/>. 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://capsnet.usc.edu/department/department-public-safety/online-forms/contact-us>. This is important for the safety of the whole USC community. Another member of the university community - such as a friend, classmate, advisor, or faculty member - can help initiate the report, or can initiate the report on behalf of another person. *The Center for Women and Men* <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/cwm/> 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 advisor or program staff to find out more. Students whose primary language is not English should check with the *American Language Institute* <http://dornsife.usc.edu/ali>, which sponsors courses and workshops specifically for international graduate students.

The Office of Disability Services and Programs

http://sait.usc.edu/academicsupport/centerprograms/dsp/home_index.html provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange the relevant accommodations.

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 an award-winning documentary producer based in Los Angeles. He recently produced *Perfecting Flight: Bob Hoover*, an independent documentary about a legendary aviator from WWII, and *The Big Bang Machine* for NOVA on PBS. The special was about one of the great scientific discoveries of modern times, the Higgs Boson particle, which explains how the universe was formed.

Among his notable projects: *Chasing Speed: Leslie Porterfield* for Velocity follows the world's fastest woman on a motorcycle in her quest for more world records. *Me Facing Life: Cyntoia's Story* is an award-winning feature documentary about a young woman sentenced to life in prison as juvenile. The film aired on PBS - Independent Lens (domestic), continues to air internationally, was part of the ITVS Community Cinema Program, and has been incorporated into school curricula. *Brace for Impact: The Chesley B. Sullenberger Story* for TLC and Discovery Channel details the successful landing of US Airways Flight 1549 on the Hudson River. *Naked Science: Death of the Universe*, a special for Nat Geo, explores new theories about how the universe will end. *Europa: Mystery of the Ice Moon*, for Science Channel, looks at a moon of Jupiter that just might support life, and *Medical Maverick*, a limited series for Discovery Health, goes into the ER with a world-class trauma surgeon.

His production company, Daniel H. Birman Productions, Inc., is active on a number of television series and specials.

Birman currently serves on the Board of Governors for the Television Academy representing the documentary peer group, and is also chairman of the membership committee.

Birman is the faculty advisor and executive producer for IMPACT, USC Annenberg's award-winning television newsmagazine show.