One of the most abused and misunderstood terms in film and television, documentary has been applied to everything from newsreels to instructional films to travelogues and TV specials.

**John Grierson**

Term 1st applied to *Moana*, (1926) a film by Robert Flaherty. Grierson later defined documentary as “a creative treatment of reality.” But noted it was a “clumsy” term.

**Pare Lorentz**

“A factual film which is dramatic.”
“A method of approach to public information”

“Not the authenticity of the materials but the authenticity of the result”

Dictionary Definition

**Documentary**
1. Consisting or derived from documents.
2. A film or program portraying an actual event, life of a real person, period of history, or the like, in a factual way, esp. one containing sections photographed of actual incidents as they occurred.
Confusion

- Does that mean *Roots* is a documentary? Is a TV movie based on the life of a wife murderer in Fresno a documentary?
- In a sense all films are documents of something, some place, or some time (i.e. films as cultural documents)
- What defines the documentary category in contest?

Academy Definition

Films dealing with historical, social, scientific, or economic subjects, either photographed in actual occurrence or re-enacted, & where the emphasis is more on factual content than entertainment. The purely instructional film will not be considered.

More Questions than Answers

- Factual & boring rather than “entertaining”?
- Re-enacted?
- “Purely instructional?”

Is this something like pornography? “I’ll know it when I see it?”
Richard M. Barsam

- Proposes term “Non-Fiction”
- All documentaries are non-fiction films, but not all non-fiction films are documentaries

5 Types of Non-Fiction Films

1. Documentary - distinguished by its sociopolitical purpose, a non-fiction film with a message. Basically wants to persuade, influence, or change. Emphasis on filmmaker’s point of view

5 Types of Non-Fiction Films

2. Factual Film -- lacks a specific message
Diff. between factual film & documentary diff. between newspaper report and an editorial
Documentary: facts + opinion
Factual Film: facts
5 Types of Non-Fiction Films

3. Travel Films or Travelogues

4. Educational, Training, Classroom films -- purpose to teach & train

5. Newsreels, TV news reports

Keys to Barsam’s Def.

All documentaries are non-fiction, but not all non-fiction films are documentaries

Newspaper story about Iraq vs. an editorial about Iraq--- to Barsam, documentary implies opinion

Continuum?

Non-Fiction

Docudrama Documentary
Never really provides a single, all-purpose definition
Instead .... groups by historical periods and approaches:
   - Explorer, Painter, Reporter, Advocate, Bugler, etc.

Bill Nichols

Totally avoids a single definition but notes 6 modes of documentary production:
1. Poetic                      2. Expository
3. Participatory              4. Observational
5. Reflexive                  6. Performatic

Examples
- Fungi
- Crutemobile
- Whose Going to Care For These Children?
- Mirror, Mirror
- Real World (MTV)
- Cops (or any other “reality” show)