

LMC 3454 Syllabus

Producing Black Documentaries and Podcast, Section A, 3 credits
Fall, 2026

Instructor Information

Instructor: John Thornton

Email: jthornton30@gatech.edu

General Course Information

Course Description

This course examines documentary filmmaking and podcasting as critical forms of communication that shape how Black voices, cultural histories, and lived experiences are represented and understood. Grounded in communication theory, discourse analysis, and theories of representation, the course asks foundational questions: How do images and sounds create meaning? Who is represented, and in what ways? How does nonfiction media participate in social, historical, and political conversations about race and power?

Drawing on theorists such as Stuart Hall, semiotics (signifier/signified), and discourse theory, students analyze documentary films and podcasts as systems of meaning rather than neutral records of reality. Through screenings, listening sessions, and video-based analysis, the course emphasizes how narrative, voice, framing, and structure encode perspectives and shape audience interpretation.

Centered in Atlanta, the course connects theory to practice through engagement with local communities, creators, and cultural spaces. Students examine how nonfiction media can document lived experience, preserve memory, and circulate ideas within specific social and cultural contexts. Storytelling is framed as a research-driven and ethical practice grounded in listening, collaboration, and accountability.

Alongside this theoretical foundation, students develop skills in research, interviewing, and audio-visual storytelling. Working collaboratively, they will produce a short-form documentary or podcast that reflects an understanding of nonfiction media as a representational and discursive practice, with cultural, historical, and social significance.

The course is an elective for the Black Media Studies Minor and is designed for students from diverse creative backgrounds.

Course Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of this course, you should be able to:

- **Analyze** how documentary films, podcasts, and digital media represent Black voices, cultural histories, and lived experiences within social, historical, and political contexts.
- **Evaluate** the role of nonfiction storytelling in shaping public understanding of social justice issues, including the influence of contemporary creators and media platforms.
- **Distinguish** the characteristics of major documentary modes and storytelling strategies, assessing how they shape meaning, audience engagement, and ethical representation.
- **Develop and execute** a research-driven documentary or podcast project, including proposal, interviews, and production planning.
- **Produce and edit** a short-form documentary or video podcast episode that demonstrates effective storytelling, technical proficiency, and collaborative teamwork.

Required Course Materials

Textbooks

Documentary Voice and Vision, by Kelly Anderson and Martin Lucas

LMC 3454 Reading Packet

Tools and Software

10 to 15 GB of cloud-based storage (iCloud, Google Drive, Dropbox, or Box)

Smartphone with HD video capabilities

Otter Voice Meeting (Free Version)

Grading Policy

Grades in this course are grounded in clearly defined expectations: the application of course techniques, thoughtful execution, creative intent, and evidence of effort and

growth. Assignments are assessed on both technical proficiency and conceptual strength—how well the work communicates an idea visually, whether it reflects the goals of the assignment, and the degree to which it pushes beyond the basic requirements.

Working hard and completing all required elements is expected and valued, but it does not automatically guarantee an "A"; higher marks are reserved for work that demonstrates exceptional clarity, creativity, and command of techniques.

A (Excellent/Exceptional Work): 90 – 100%

An "A-level" submission exceeds expectations in both concept and execution. It demonstrates mastery of visual language and a clear artistic vision. The work uses composition, framing, lighting, color, and production design purposefully and cohesively to enhance narrative or emotional impact. The creative decisions appear thoughtful, and the overall execution feels intentional and refined.

B (Strong/Above Average Work): 80 – 89%

A "B-level" submission fully meets the assignment requirements and demonstrates solid technique, organization, and visual coherence. Composition is considered, framing is deliberate, lighting and color choices support the mood, and production design contributes to the visual world. While it may not take significant creative risks, it shows a good understanding of course concepts and an apparent effort to apply them meaningfully. Some elements may be underdeveloped or slightly inconsistent, but the overall work is thoughtful and effectively executed. B-level work reflects progress and attention to craft, even if it stops short of being exceptional. Creative risks may be present but not fully realized, or the execution may be solid with minor inconsistencies. Overall, it shows substantial progress and developing fluency in cinematic craft.

C (Satisfactory/Meets Minimum Requirements): 70 – 79%

A "C-level" submission meets the basic expectations of the assignment but lacks clarity, cohesion, or conceptual execution. The student applies some course concepts but often does so inconsistently or superficially. Additionally, there may be missteps in framing, uneven lighting, unclear production design, or underutilized color and camera treatment. Technical execution is rough, with noticeable issues in lighting, framing, continuity, or design. The piece feels rushed, underdeveloped, and there are apparent missed opportunities to enhance visual storytelling. C-level work demonstrates effort but does not fully realize the potential of the assignment.

F (Below Expectations): <70%

A "F-level" submission falls short of assignment requirements in key areas. The work illustrates minimal effort, lacks clear intention, or disregards fundamental techniques.

There are several problems with composition, lighting, framing, or production design that significantly undermine the effectiveness of the piece. The work is incomplete, poorly executed, or shows minimal application of course content. D-level work does not reflect the standards expected in a creative production course and is not suitable for portfolio inclusion.

Assignments:

Assignment 1: Media Block 1 Discussion, Discussions (30%)

Assignment 2: Visual Semiotics Video Essay, Video Essays (30%)

Assignment 3: Media Block 2 Discussion, Discussions (30%)

Assignment 4: Discourse Analysis Video Essay, Video Essays (30%)

Assignment 5: Theory Driven Video Essay, Video Essays (30%)

Assignment 6: Media Block 3 Discussion, Discussions (30%)

Assignment 7: Final Project Proposal, Final Project (40%)

Assignment 8: Final Project, Final Project (40%)

Description of Graded Components

Media Blocks 1 - 3 Discussions: Working in small groups, students will schedule a Zoom session apply the critical framework to discuss the films in the Media Block. The discussion video should be at least 15 to 40 minutes. Though this is a group assignment, students are graded individually based on their contributions to the discussion. You must actively contribute to the discussion by pulling out specific examples from the assigned reading to receive full credit for the assignment. Also, students must discuss all of the films within the allotted time. **Media Block Discussions count towards 30% of the final grade.**

Assignment 2: Visual Semiotics Video Essay: Select one documentary image or short sequence (1 to 2 minutes) focused on Black life, culture, or history. Create a 3-to-5-minute video essay that performs a semiotic close reading, explaining how meaning is constructed through visual and/or sonic signs. **Video Essays count towards 30% of the final grade.**

Assignments 4: Discourse Analysis Video Essay: Choose one documentary film or podcast episode and create a 3-to-5-minute video essay examining how it constructs knowledge through discourse. Students must show how the media organizes voice,

credibility, and ideology—not whether it is “accurate.” **Video Essays count towards 30% of the final grade.**

Assignment 5: Theory Driven Video Essay: Create a 3-to-5-minute **original** video essay that applies one theoretical concept from the course to a real subject, space, or story connected to Black life or culture. **Video Essays count towards 30% of the final grade.**

Assignment 7: Final Project Proposal: Students will develop a detailed pitch deck and proposal for a 10-minute documentary or podcast on a topic of their choice. This pitch deck should outline a documentary concept and serve as the foundation for decision-making. The pitch should be compelling, visually appealing, and clear, and it must follow the required structure for consistency and evaluation. **The Final Project Proposal count towards 40% of the final grade.**

Assignment 8: Final Project: The final cut of your documentary/video podcast is the polished and professional version of the story you have been building throughout the semester. Building on the feedback and lessons from your rough cut, the Final Cut emphasizes refining your narrative, enhancing technical quality, and incorporating key post-production elements like subtitles, lower thirds, closing credits, music, and color grading. Your final cut should be a cohesive, visually engaging, and emotionally resonant 10-minute documentary or video podcast, demonstrating understanding of storytelling and technical skills. **The Final Project count towards 40% of the final grade.**

Course Policies

Attendance

Attendance is mandatory. I will take attendance at the start of every session. Anyone who misses four classes or has four unexcused absences will automatically drop a letter grade. Anyone who accumulates six unexcused absences will automatically fail. Students who arrive more than 15 minutes after the scheduled start time are considered absent. The Institute’s [rules and regulations](#) for approved absences will be strictly adhered to. If you must miss class, please contact me through MS Teams **at least 30 minutes before** class time to discuss excusing your absence. If you miss an in-class exercise or film shoot due to an unexcused absence, then you will not be permitted to make it up.

Core IMPACTS

This is a Core IMPACTS course in the Humanities area. Core IMPACTS refers to the core curriculum, which provides students with essential knowledge in foundational academic areas. This course will help students master the course content and support their broad academic and career goals. This course should direct students toward a broad, broad-

orienting question: *How do I interpret human experience through creative, linguistic, and philosophical works?*

Completion of this course should enable students to meet the following Learning Outcomes:

- Students will effectively analyze and interpret the meaning, cultural significance, and ethical implications of literary or philosophical texts or works in the visual or performing arts.

Course content, activities, and exercises in this course should help students develop the following Career-Ready Competencies:

- Ethical Reasoning
- Information Literacy
- Intercultural Competence

Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

If you are a student with learning needs that require special accommodation, [contact the Office of Disability Services](#) (404) 894-2563 as soon as possible to make an appointment to discuss your needs, and to obtain an accommodation letter. Also, please schedule a meeting with me to discuss your learning needs.

Student-Faculty Expectations Agreement

At Georgia Tech, we believe that it is important to strive for an atmosphere of mutual respect, acknowledgement, and responsibility between faculty members and the student body. [The Student Faculty Expectations](#) articulate some basic expectations that you can have of me and that I have of you.

Course Expectations, Policies and Resources

Pre- &/or Co-Requisites

- ENGL 1102

Microsoft Teams

We will use **Microsoft Teams** as the primary method of communication in this course. I will share weekly objectives, notes, journal prompts, prereading assignments, previewing assignments, and announcements through Teams. Microsoft Teams is the **best (and preferred) method** to contact me outside of class. If you are running late or need to take an excused absence, please notify me by sending a message through Teams. Emails will not suffice in these instances. If you would like to schedule a meeting with me outside of class, please send those requests via email.

Late Assignments and Extensions

Canvas will automatically apply a 6% **deduction per day** that the assignment is **late**, regardless of the reason why it's late. Students may request a one-time extension on any assignment **except for the final project**. Late penalties also apply to group projects. It is essential to maintain open lines of communication with your team to ensure that someone uploads the assignment on time. Students who are ill or have extenuating circumstances may request a 2-day extension on any assignment. Please send your request for an extension to me via Teams.

Viewing List

To access the assigned films, navigate to Canvas > **Pages** > "Viewing List"

Reading List

To access the articles and book sections, navigate to Canvas > **Files** > "Reading Sections"

Schedule of Classes

Week 1: Defining a Documentary

- Reading: Reading Packet Articles 1 and 2
- Viewings: Media Block 1

Week 2: Semiotics: The Signifier vs. The Signified

- Reading: Reading Packet Article 3
- Viewings: Media Block 1

Week 3: Stuart Hall and "Representation"

- Readings: Reading Packet Articles 4
- Viewings: Media Block 1
- Due: Assignment 1

Week 4: Discourse Theory

- Reading: Reading Packet Article 5
- Viewings: Media Block 2
- Due: Assignment 2

Week 5: Race, Visibility, and Invisibility

- Assignment: Assignment 8
- Viewings: Media Block 2

- Due: Assignment 4

Week 6: Documentary and Podcasts Modes as Discourse Forms

- Reading: Voice & Vision Chapters 1 - 3
- Viewings: Media Block 3
- Due: Assignment 5

Week 7-8: Producing the Documentary Production Techniques

- Reading: Voice & Vision Chapters 6, 7, 11, 13, and 15

Weeks 9 -10: Producing the Episodic Podcast Production Techniques

- Reading: Voice and Vision Chapters 13, 15, 17, and 19
- Due: Assignment 6

Week 11: Final Project Presentations

- Due: Assignment 7

Weeks 12 -15: Final Project Production

- Due: Assignment 8