

NRM 2061/ENV 2005
Critical Thinking Papers

Nuts and Bolts: Papers should be short (3 pages or 750 words max.) that analyze and critically reflect on the concepts, ideas, and images presented in the weekly documentaries, drawing upon both personal insight and outside references. Figures, quotes, and ideas should be properly cited and referenced (see http://webster.commnet.edu/mla/practical_guide.shtml for referencing of books, journals, etc. and <http://webster.commnet.edu/mla/online.shtml> for referencing of internet resources). Assignments must be written professionally (grammar and spelling count!).

Getting Starting: Write a brief synopsis/summary of the documentary. Good summaries are challenging to write. Think of the summary as an “abstract”. An abstract in scientific research communicates the nature of a problem, how the problem was investigated, and what results were found as a result of the investigation. Similarly, a documentary presents a particular subject matter, uses various storytelling techniques to present one or more perspectives on the subject matter, and guides the viewer (either overtly or subtly) to some sort of conclusion about the subject. You should convey the most important summary ideas in a very limited space (spend no more than 250 words on your summary).

Critical thinking and reflection. Critical thinking is the use of cognitive skills or strategies that are purposeful, reasoned, and goal directed. Critical thinking is involved in problem solving, formulating inferences, calculating likelihoods, and making decisions. Critical thinking is the basis of presenting sound and reasoned argument. Your initial summary will require that you systematically reflect on the contents of the documentary. The weekly documentaries are intended to engage both your mind (cognition) and heart (affect/emotion). Having a strong reaction (positive or negative) to the documentary is healthy. This means you were “tuned in”. But documentaries offer the filmmaker’s perspective. The documentaries are intended to inform but you should be skeptical about the veracity (truthfulness) of the information. There are at least three approaches to completing the critical thinking paper:

Approach 1—Expand the topic. Provide more comprehensive information about the topic covered in the documentary. Documentaries only provide a limited amount of information. The documentaries provide a starting point for you to dig deeper into the topic. For example, what is the WTO? What is the magnitude of the farmed animal trade? What is the current state of old-growth forests in N. America? Use library and internet resources to research the topic in greater depth.

Approach 2—Extend the topic through analogy. An analogy is a logical inference based on the assumption that if two things are known to be alike in certain ways, they must be alike in other ways. You can extend the documentary topic to other contexts (e.g., how are free-trade agreements like/unlike the WTO? How are old-growth forest issues in N. America like or unlike global forestry issues? Do aboriginal peoples of Australia have similar relationships with animals like the “Buffalo people”?)

Approach 3—Analyze the film by reflecting on the film’s structure. Curran provides background about the elements of film structure (see Curran, Chapter 4). Using the language of shots, scenes, sequences, and acts, describe the film’s structure. She provides examples of this approach using two case studies found on pp. 51-60.

Approach 4—Do what you want. This approach is riskier. Impress me. Show insightfulness. Consult outside references. Demonstrate creative thinking.

Paper Assessment. The papers will be graded using 4 criteria—1) the quality of your synopsis and interpretation, 2) the quality of your argument(s) and reasoning, 3) the quality of evidence presented in support of your argument(s) including references, and 4) grammar, style, and general presentation.

Don’t be afraid to ask questions!!!!