



Step 7 – Endings with Impact

Ending with Impact in Documentary Films

TOP TIP

Documentary films are scripted just like stories – in fact, the best ones operate like a narrative. It pays to know the structure before you start, which means knowing how the film will end before you write the beginning.

Like classic narratives, documentary films often have three parts:

- A **beginning** that grabs the viewer's attention and introduces the main characters and key conflict.
- A **middle**, usually multiple scenes that build interest, develop the theme and play out the conflict.
- An **ending**, including the moment when the tension or conflict comes to a peak, and a resolution or emotional appeal to the viewer.

Action Activity

1. Together, watch the trailer for the BBC Earth documentary, One Life: <https://youtu.be/ZknxPkp5ki8> (running time: 1 minute, 52 seconds)
2. Discuss: What do students expect to see in the documentary? How does the trailer build anticipation? Which footage hooks the viewer?
3. Make a class list of the emotional words students would use to describe the footage, music, feeling and voice over in the trailer.
4. Now watch the ending of the One Life series, which can be found as a clip here: <https://youtu.be/4-8LMHfKLEg> (running time: 1 minute, 27 seconds)
5. What phrases would students use to describe the message and emotion of the ending? Probe for complexity of emotion, like 'it appeals to something deep' or 'it challenges us not to think of humans as the only important life on earth'.
6. Do students see any of the same footage as in the trailer? (Did anyone notice that the last image of the trailer is the first image of the ending?)
7. Explore different types of endings:
 - a) Link to the opening – close with a reference to a moment when the story began
 - b) Paint a word picture – use emotion to give meaning to what you have shown
 - c) Call to action – ask the viewer to do something
 - d) Look at the future – ask questions or point to events that might happen in the future.
8. Students choose a topic from the list below and draft, in point form, the beginning, the middle and the end of their documentary film. Work up to doing five endings in five minutes so that they become comfortable with trying ideas and letting them go.
9. At the end of the quick writing session, ask students to share their favourite documentary idea with a partner. Together, pairs report back on what type of ending they used: Link to the opening; Word picture; Call to action; or Look at the future.

Top Topics

Topics 1–5 (Animals and the natural world)

1. Why are people afraid of sharks?
2. Polar bears in Churchill, Manitoba, Canada.
3. Wombat rescue in Australia.
4. Protecting crocodiles in Australia's north.
5. The dangers of pearl diving.

Topics 6–10 (Different daily lives)

6. Dairy price wars and why they happened in Australia.
7. Living on a cattle station.
8. What changes when cities go high-rise.
9. The modern family in Australia.
10. A day in the life of a dog trainer.

Topics 11–15 (Amazing feats and fantastic peeps)

11. How (and why) refugee Nujeen Mustafa travelled over 5,000 km in a wheelchair.
12. The career of Danny MacAskill, world-famous trials bike rider.
13. Jessica Watson, the 16-year old Australian who sailed around the world alone.
14. Ashima Shiraishi, the 'Rock Dancer' and world's best rock-climber.
15. Adam Goodes, AFL star and man of the Adnyamathanha nation.

Topics 16–20 (Leadership and inspiration)

16. What it means to be a mentor.
17. The life of Michelle Obama.
18. How Malala Yousafzai won the Nobel Peace Prize.
19. Emma Watson and the United Nations (UN).
20. Beyoncé Knowles and the power of self-worth.