

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF DOCUMENTARIES:

Curiosity, Empathy, and the Pull of the Real

DISCUSSION GUIDE

“

Documentaries don't just show us the world—they invite us to care about it, understand it, and sometimes, to change it.

”

♥ PURPOSE

To explore why we're drawn to documentaries, how they shape our thinking and feelings, and how we can watch with curiosity, empathy, and a critical eye.



BEFORE YOU WATCH

- What do you expect from this documentary?
- What draws you to stories about real people and events?
- What questions or biases might you bring with you?

CURIOSITY & DISCOVERY



We seek to know how the world works and what really happened.

EMPATHY & CONNECTION



We connect with real people and feel what they experience.

TRUTH & MEANING



We look for understanding in complex stories.

MORAL AWARENESS & ACTION



Real stories can challenge our values and inspire us to take action.

ESCAPE & ENGAGEMENT



We get absorbed in stories that inform, entertain, and move us.



GUIDELINES FOR GREAT DISCUSSIONS

- Listen with respect and curiosity.
- There are no wrong answers.
- Speak from your own experience.
- Challenge ideas, not people.
- What's said here, stays here.



THOUGHT-PROVOKING QUESTIONS

- What drew you into the story most: the people, the mystery, the issue, or something else?
- How did knowing this was "real" change the way you watched compared to fiction?
- Which parts evoked the strongest emotions in you? Why?
- Did any part of the story surprise or challenge your assumptions? What?
- How did the storytelling techniques (music, editing, interviews, images) influence you?
- What questions do you still have after watching?
- What does this story reveal about the world—or about human nature?
- Did anything, does this story inspire you to do or think differently about?



GROUP ACTIVITY

MAP THE STORY

On a large sheet of paper, create a simple map of the documentary.

- What was the central issue or question?
- Who were the key people or voices?
- What were the main turning points?
- What themes or messages emerged?

Then, discuss:
What made this story powerful?
What impact might it have on those watching?



PERSONAL REFLECTION

Take a few minutes to write about:

- What did I learn about the world?
- What did I learn about people?
- What might I pay more attention to in my own life now?



RED FLAGS: WATCH WITH A CRITICAL EYE

- One-sided storytelling or missing perspectives
- Unverified claims or questionable sources
- Emotional manipulation to get a reaction
- Sensationalism over substance
- Lack of context or important background information
- Editing that shapes the story in a



TRY THIS

- Research the topic from at least one other source.
- Look for perspectives that may be missing.
- Talk about the documentary with someone you trust.
- Use what you learn to stay curious and engaged.



DISCUSSION STARTERS

- What will stay with you the most from this story?
- What questions do you want to explore more?
- How does this story connect to your life or community?
- What would you recommend this documentary to—and why?
- If you could ask the filmmaker one question, what would it be?



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