**WATCH THE DOCUMENTARY *SPELLBOUND*.**

**Objective:**

Develop and/or practice “pay attention like a writer” skills and “Active Reading Strategy” skills. Using your notes and observations, create a piece of writing that incorporates some of your descriptions or snippets or that uses the story, characters, or interviews as an inspiration for a new kind of writing.

Your writing should show you are paying attention to and trying to use interesting, appropriate **diction**, interesting **sounds** (individual words, phrases, sentences), effective **concrete details**, and **juxtaposition** where appropriate (Writer’s Toolkit).

**OPTIONS (from easiest to most difficult)**

**POEM (INCORPORATING SNIPPETS) THAT COMMUNICATES A SENSE OF THE FILM’S PURPOSE**: You’ll need to take good active reading notes, recording snippets, conversations, descriptions, names, words, and moments. Then choose and combine (and add any other phrases, sentences, descriptions you want or need to) them to create a poem that retells or tells another side or point of view of the film but that emphasizes the insights you gained from watching the film (For example, what do you understand about how class and money affect the outcome? Or what are the feelings or hopes of all of the students?). Probably 1-1 ½ pages

**ARN-CRITICAL THINKING AND JOURNAL RESPONSE:** Take careful, good active reading notes that show you are focused on 3-4 of the strategies the ARN sheet suggested good readers use. Then, when you’ve taken your notes, write a thoughtful journal response responding to 4-5 of the questions I provided. Choose questions that can be incorporated together to show a larger insight or understanding. Don’t just choose the four easiest random questions and give me basic responses. Choose the ones that will allow you to think deeply and respond thoughtfully in a coherent way. 1 ½ -2 pages.

Active Reading (Watching) Strategy Questions and Journal Response Considerations

What am I being told? What am I not being told?

What else would I like to see? Is there a larger context?

How am I being told? (logos, pathos) Are these, in fact, facts?

For whom is this film intended? (audience)

Is this a full or partial account of the situation?

Who else's side should I be hearing?

Is this fair: What would the other side say?

Is there a different way to understand these facts?

Is this person a credible authority? (ethos)

Why (or why not) is this a good medium for this information?

Yes, this is awful (important, wonderful); what should be done?

What is the filmmaker's agenda? (purpose)

How is the story being slanted with filmmaking techniques?

*(music, voiceovers, camera angles, graphics, editing, lighting, [acting, writing])*

*(interview, cutaways, process shots, chill [observational] footage, archive footage)*

How do constraints limit the filmmaker’s ability to present the material?

*(money, time, access to archival footage, unavailable interviewees, etc.)*

Am I too easy on this film because I agree with its purpose?

Am I too hard on this film because I disagree with its purpose?

Is the film’s purpose worth the time, money, and effort of the filmmakers and/or audience?

What was most interesting? Enjoyable? Disconcerting? Disturbing? Insightful?

**PERSONAL NARRATIVE**: Write a personal narrative about a time when you worked very hard for a goal or were involved in a competition. Notice what aspects the filmmaker focuses on and then consider focusing on some of the same things in your narrative (how you prepared, what your were scared of, what kind of support you got from friends and family, etc.).

The narrative should include the following:

1. An interesting opening paragraph to draw the reader in.
2. A description or narrative of the experience using concrete details, specific setting, specific characters, dialogue.
3. Make sure you have an overall goal in mind and then organize the narrative and details that will be most effective in helping you make your point.
4. End with a satisfying conclusion that, perhaps, refers back to the opening paragraph or some moment in the essay and shows the growth or understanding or disappointment or whatever that you want the reader to take away.

Look at a couple of personal narratives from previous *Euphony* magazines or consider reading or listening to some personal narratives from people like Steve Martin, David Sedaris, or Bailey White to get a “feel” or sense of how they organize their personal narratives to make even the smallest experiences interesting and entertaining to read. 1 ½-3 pages

*Euphony* vol. XXIX: “Worlds Within Its Walls,” pp. 98-99

*Euphony* vol. XXX: “Grumpy’s Fishing Curse,” p. 17; “The Fall,” p. 50; “Food Memories,” p. 103

*Euphony* Vol. XXXI: “Snow-Covered Mountainside,” p. 57

*Euphony* vol. XXXII: Unexpected Encounter,” p. 15

**FICTIONALIZED CHARACTEERIZATION:** This would be fictional. You would describe one of the characters from 1st person point of view, allowing their personality to come through by what and how they talk or what they do. Perhaps imagine a setting or situation difference from the film and place the character(s) in it. See what happens. If you do this, you’ll need to pay close attention to all of the physical characteristics, personality traits, family background, etc. so that whatever happens feels “true” given how these kids were presented in the film. 2 pages.

*Euphony* vol. XXX: ”Grandma,” p. 54; “Lavender Love,” p. 55; “Alexa,” p. 59

*Euphony* vol. XXXI: “”Don’t Take Yourself So Seriously,” p. 19; “This is Me,” p. 35

**MODIFIED OR FICTIONALIZED RETELLING OF *SPELLBOUND****.* Write a fictional account of this spelling bee. Consider, perhaps, just telling the story from one of the character’s points of view. Feel free to add, subtract, pervert, modify characters, conversations, outcomes, etc. to create the most entertaining version. You might consider looking at the retelling of the movie *Aladdin* or “The Three Little Pigs” in previous editions of Euphony to get some ideas about how you could satirize this film or create a whole new story. If you do this, you’ll want to SHOW not just TELL the story, using characters, dialogue, descriptions, action, etc. You might only want to focus on the last day of the competition or the last two days given the time you’ll have. 3-4 pages.

*Euphony* vol. XXIX: “A Laddin,” pp. 44-46; “”The Three Little Pigs,” pp. 34-36

*Euphony* vol. XXX: “Swimming Lessons,” pp. 64-65

**REVIEW** of the film. See the reviews I’ve provided from professional writers who viewed *Hoop Dreams*, another highly regarded documentary. Your review doesn’t need to be as long as the professional reviews, but it should follow the basic format:

 1) Opener that catches the reader’s attention and leads to a

2) Short description of the film, summarizing major plot points, but emphasizing incidents or ideas (or filmmaking techniques) that are most important to understanding the film’s purpose.

4) Examination of the film’s purpose, theme, effect, or its importance to larger cultural understanding. This is NOT a plot summary. You examine or interpret the insights and/or understandings that the viewer will leave with after seeing the film. Alternatively, you could examine what the film’s goal or purpose was and examine how the filmmaker either achieved or didn’t achieve his/her purpose (strengths, weaknesses, rhetorical strategies).

If you choose to do a review, I strongly suggest you read several more reviews of documentaries in order to get a sense or “feel” of the organization and conventions reviewers use. I suggest going to the following site: http://www.rottentomatoes.com/top/bestofrt/top\_100\_documentary\_movies/?category=8

It lists 100 best documentaries from the last 20 years or so. If you look those up on the rotten tomatoes site, you can see reviews by professional reviewers.

DO NOT read reviews of *Spellbound*. Reading what other reviewers have written will do all of the thinking for you, and you’ll end up just restating (or plagiarizing) other people’s ideas. Read reviews of other documentaries to get ideas of organization, ways to (1) include a summary without giving the whole movie away, (2) ways to incorporate concrete examples and details from the movie to underscore or support your ideas, or filmmaking techniques (score, editing, lighting, interview techniques) you want to critique. (3) Notice the strategies reviewers use to open their reviews and to end them. After you’ve gotten a feel for how it’s done, write your review. 1 ½ – 2 typed, double-spaced pages would be about the proper length.

*Euphony* vol. XXIX: “Dose of Eclectic,” p. 53; ”Epitome of Perfection,” p. 80

*Euphony* vol. XXX: “Stuck in a Moment,” p. 34; “Commemoration,” p. 89

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**Battered Dreams Of Glory**

By [David Ansen](http://www.newsweek.com/authors/david-ansen)

Filed: 10/16/94 at 8:00 PM  | Updated: 3/13/10 at 9:24 PM

NOT TOO MANY FILMMAKERS ARE determined enough, or crazy enough, to devote seven years of their lives to the making of a movie. A movie that has no stars, no script, and was made on a budget that would barely cover the catering costs on "True Lies." Indeed, the odds against Hoop Dreams ever seeing the light of day were overwhelming, for it is a documentary, and the term itself carries such a commercial stigma that only a few are lucky enough to get a theatrical release.

But "Hoop Dreams" has more than good luck on its side: it's one of the richest movie experiences of the year, a spellbinding American epic that holds you firmly in its grip for nearly three hours. Chicago film-makers Steve James, Frederick Marx and Peter Gilbert, spent four and a half years following two inner-city kids with dreams of NBA glory, William Gates and Arthur Agee, basketball prodigies whose hopes of escaping the hazards of the ghetto rest on their hardwood performance. With an intimacy that never seems intrusive, "Hoop Dreams" tracks them through high school up to the brink of college. We watch two boys turn into young men before our eyes. And we see a portrait of inner-city struggle and survival shorn of the sound-bite cliches of TV and the sensationalist reductionism of Hollywood 'hood fields. "Hoop Dreams" has all the suspense of a soap opera, but without the manipulation. It lets us draw our own conclusions, never forcing the story to fit a preordained agenda, never making easy generalizations out of the lives it examines with such cleareyed generosity.

At 14, Gates and Agee are given financial aid to attend St. Joseph's, a suburban Catholic high school that prides itself for producing superstar Isiah Thomas. The quiet Gates, who lives in the Cabrini Green project and enters school at a fifth-grade academic level, is the blue-chip prospect, in whom coach Gene Pingatore sees a ghm-met of the Thomas magic. Agee is the gangly speedster, a diamond in the rough. He has to make a three-hour round trip to St. Joseph's, where there are more white faces than he's ever seen. By sophomore year, Gates is on the honor roll, and Agee, whose father has been laid off, is forced to transfer to all-black Marshall High School.

You think you can see which way fate's arrows are pointing, but life isn't so predictable. One kid is felled by a knee injury, and has to undergo surgery. We're startled to learn that, in his junior year, Gates becomes a father. Agee's father deserts his family, and we see him on a playground where Arthur is shooting hoops, a stumbling figure scoring drugs. We get a haunting view of Gates's older brother, Curtis. A former basketball whiz deemed "uncoachable," he invests all his blasted NBA fantasies in his younger brother. There are heartbreaking, exhilarating ups and downs-a family plunged into darkness when their electricity is cut off; the pride of Arthur's mother when she graduates from a nurse's assistant's course; the nail-biting state championships.

The movie captures the meat-market frenzy of the basketball camps, where college recruiters come to salivate over the hot prospects, and the hard-sell pressure they put on the boys. A friend succumbs to the temptation of drug dealing and gets caught. The stakes in this movie couldn't be higher. When Mrs. Agee celebrates her son's birthday, her gratitude is not for his accomplishment on the court, but that he's managed to live to 18. This is a portrait of inner-city America as complex, moving and surprising as any film has given us.

When James and Marx--later joined by cinematographer Gilbert-conceived of this project, in 1987, they thought it would be a 80-minute film about the culture of inner-city playground basketball. With $2,500 in grants and the producing help of Kartemquin Films, they began to look for their subjects. The first week of shooting they met Agee and Gates, and quickly realized that their plans had to be drastically revised: these were kids they had to follow, wherever it led.

It led them eventually to shoot 250 hours of film, almost every game and major event in the boys' lives. The project struggled through the first three years on only $2,500. (Later they got $70,000 from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and a $250,000 MacArthur Foundation grant.) Everyone had a second job. Marriages were strained, debts accumulated and the filmmakers grew more and more attached to their subjects. Peter Gilbert's wife, Dru, recalls: "What really got to me was when things were not going well with the families. Peter would come home adding misery to the pile. But then our problems would look minuscule in comparison to theirs."

"There were times when it was difficult to separate the roles of filmmaker/observer and extended family friend," admits Steve James. When the Agees' power was shut off, the filmmakers pulled some money together to restore it. It was the one moment when they clearly stepped beyond their roles as documentarians. "We weren't just going to exploit their pain and suffering. They say that to be a great documentary film-maker you have to be cutthroat and not get involved. But if that's what it takes, then we don't want to be great documentary filmmakers."

"Hoop Dreams" had its triumphant premiere at the Sundance Film Festival, where it won the audience award and found a distributor, Fine Line Features. It was the first documentary ever chosen for closing night at the New York Film Festival. (And recently St. Joseph's and coach Pingalore brought a lawsuit against the film, claiming it depicts the school "in a false and untrue light.") It's even generating spinoffs: there's a book and possibly a fictionalized TV movie; an album, single and video of Ben Sidran's fine jazz and rap score are in the works, and hats and T shirts will be sold to benefit inner-city programs.

The bitter irony is that William Gates and Arthur Agee have not been able to share in the glory. Because they are college players, the NCAA has forbidden them from sharing in the proceeds or talking about the movie: their comments would be considered commercial endorsements. "We are in an appeal process to get them to let us compensate the families for their involvement," says James. So far, the NCAA is holding firm. "Do they want to play basketball or do they want to be movie stars?" says the NCAA's Mike Racy. "Under our rules they can't do both." The NCAA, which ought to have better things to worry about, has an odd idea of what a movie star is. But "Hoop Dreams" has shown us that the rules of the game are stacked against kids like Gates and Agee. Even better, it shows us how they fight back, with the inside moves of hope.

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October 21, 1994, Roger Ebert (No Title)

A film like "Hoop Dreams" is what the movies are for. It takes us, shakes us, and make us think in new ways about the world around us. It gives us the impression of having touched life itself.

"Hoop Dreams" is, on one level, a documentary about two African-American kids named William Gates and Arthur Agee, from Chicago's inner city, who are gifted basketball players and dream of someday starring in the NBA. On another level, it is about much larger subjects: about ambition, competition, race and class in our society. About our value structures. And about the daily lives of people like the Agee and Gates families, who are usually invisible in the mass media, but have a determination and resiliency that is a cause for hope.

The movie spans six years in the lives of William and Arthur, starting when they are in the eighth grade, and continuing through the first year of college. It was intended originally to be a 30-minute short, but as the filmmakers followed their two subjects, they realized this was a much larger, and longer story. And so we are allowed to watch the subjects grow up during the movie, and this palpable sense of the passage of time is like walking for a time in their shoes.

They're spotted during playground games by a scout for St.

Joseph's High School in west suburban Westchester, a basketball powerhouse. Attending classes there will mean a long daily commute to a school with few other black faces, but there's never an instant when William or Arthur, or their families, doubt the wisdom of this opportunity: St. Joseph's, we hear time and again, is the school where another inner-city kid, Isiah Thomas, started his climb to NBA stardom.

One image from the film: Gates, who lives in the Cabrini Green project, and Agee, who lives on Chicago's South Side, get up before dawn on cold winter days to begin their daily 90-minute commute to Westchester. The street lights reflect off the hard winter ice, and we realize what a long road - what plain hard work - is involved in trying to get to the top of the professional sports pyramid. Other high school students may go to "career counselors," who steer them into likely professions. Arthur and William are working harder, perhaps, than anyone else in their school - for jobs which, we are told, they have only a .00005 percent chance of winning.

We know all about the dream. We watch [Michael Jordan](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/michael-jordan) and Isiah Thomas and the others on television, and we understand why any kid with talent would hope to be out on the same courts someday. But "Hoop Dreams" is not simply about basketball. It is about the texture and reality of daily existence in a big American city. And as the film follows Agee and Gates through high school and into their first year of college, we understand all of the human dimensions behind the easy media images of life in the "ghetto."

We learn, for example, of how their extended families pull together to help give kids a chance. How if one family member is going through a period of trouble (Arthur's father is fighting a drug problem), others seem to rise to periods of strength. How if some family members are unemployed, or if the lights get turned off, there is also somehow an uncle with a big back yard, just right for a family celebration. We see how the strong black church structure provides support and encouragement - how it is rooted in reality, accepts people as they are, and believes in redemption.

And how some people never give up. Arthur's mother asks the filmmakers, "Do you ever ask yourself how I get by on $268 a month and keep this house and feed these children? Do you ever ask yourself that question?" Yes, frankly, we do. But another question is how she finds such determination and hope that by the end of the film, miraculously, she has completed her education as a nursing assistant.

"Hoop Dreams" contains more actual information about life as it is lived in poor black city neighborhoods than any other film I have ever seen.

Because we see where William and Arthur come from, we understand how deeply they hope to transcend - to use their gifts to become pro athletes. We follow their steps along the path that will lead, they hope, from grade school to the NBA.

The people at St. Joseph's High School are not pleased with the way they appear in the film, and have filed suit, saying among other things that they were told the film would be a non-profit project to be aired on PBS, not a commercial venture. The filmmakers respond that they, too, thought it would - that the amazing response which has found it a theatrical release is a surprise to them. The movie simply turned out to be a masterpiece, and its intended non-commercial slot was not big enough to hold it. The St. Joseph suit reveals understandable sensitivity, because not all of the St.

Joseph people come out looking like heroes.

It is as clear as night and day that the only reason Arthur Agee and William Gates are offered scholarships to St. Joseph's in the first place is because they are gifted basketball players. They are hired as athletes as surely as if they were free agents in pro ball; suburban high schools do not often send scouts to the inner city to find future scientists or teachers.

Both sets of parents are required to pay a small part of the tuition costs. When Gates' family cannot pay, a member of the booster club pays for him - because he seems destined to be a high school all-American. Arthur at first does not seem as talented. And when he has to drop out of the school because his parents have both lost their jobs, there is no sponsor for him. Instead, there's a telling scene where the school refuses to release his transcripts until the parents have paid their share of his tuition.

The morality here is clear: St. Joseph's wanted Arthur, recruited him, and would have found tuition funds for him if he had played up to expectations.

When he did not, the school held the boy's future as hostage for a debt his parents clearly would never have contracted if the school's recruiters had not come scouting grade school playgrounds for the boy. No wonder St. Joseph's feels uncomfortable. Its behavior seems like something out of Dickens. The name Scrooge comes to mind.

Gene Pingatore, the coach at St. Joseph's, is a party to the suit (which actually finds a way to plug the Isiah Thomas connection). He feels he's seen in an unattractive light. I thought he came across fairly well. Like all coaches, he believes athletics are a great deal more important than they really are, and there is a moment when he leaves a decision to Gates that Gates is clearly not well-prepared to make. But it isn't Pingatore but the whole system that is brought into question: What does it say about the values involved, when the pro sports machine reaches right down to eighth-grade playgrounds?

But the film is not only, or mostly, about such issues. It is about the ebb and flow of life over several years, as the careers of the two boys go through changes so amazing that, if this were fiction, we would say it was unbelievable. The filmmakers ([Steve James](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/steve-james), Frederick Marx and Peter Gilbert) shot miles of film, 250 hours in all, and that means they were there for several of the dramatic turning-points in the lives of the two young men. For both, there are reversals of fortune - life seems bleak, and then is redeemed by hope and sometimes even triumph. I was caught up in their destinies as I rarely am in a fiction thriller, because real life can be a cliff-hanger, too.

Many filmgoers are reluctant to see documentaries, for reasons I've never understood; the good ones are frequently more absorbing and entertaining than fiction. "Hoop Dreams," however, is not only a documentary. It is also poetry and prose, muckraking and expose, journalism and polemic. It is one of the great moviegoing experiences of my lifetime.