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ABSTRACT

This lesson plan for students in grades 9-12 follows the guiding question, "How do filmmakers bring history to life, and how does filmed history represent (or misrepresent) historical realities?" Through these lessons, students employ the screenwriter's craft to gain a fresh perspective on historical research, learning how filmmakers combine scholarship and imagination to bring historical figures to life and how the demands of cinematic storytelling can shape the view of the past. Students will: (1) learn about the craft of filmmaking and role of the screenwriter; (2) examine a first-person documentary narrative from a screenwriter's point of view, focusing on the kinds of information needed to create a story that will bring the past to life on film; (3) gather contextual details through historical research; (4) consider the relationship between historical narrative and the storytelling conventions of film; and (5) produce a film scenario and script a scene based on the life of a historical figure. Intended for grades 9-12, the plan notes subject areas covered (literature/biography, U.S. history, and film), time required to complete the lesson, skills used and taught in the lesson, and the standards developed by professional associations or governments that are related to the lesson. Activities to extend the lesson and references for further exploration conclude the lesson plan. (SR)

Scripting the Past: Exploring Women's History through Film. [Lesson Plan].

Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

Scripting the Past: Exploring Women's History Through Film

Introduction

In this lesson, students employ the screenwriter's craft to gain a fresh perspective on historical research, learning how filmmakers combine scholarship and imagination to bring historical figures to life and how the demands of cinematic storytelling can shape our view of the past.

Learning Objectives

(1) To learn about the craft of filmmaking and role of the screenwriter within the filmmaking process. (2) To examine a first-person documentary narrative from a screenwriter's point of view, focusing on the kinds of information needed to create a story that will bring the past to life on film. (3) To gather contextual details required for a film treatment through historical research. (4) To consider the relationship between historical narrative and the storytelling conventions of film. (5) To produce a film scenario and script a scene based on the life of a historical figure.

Lesson Plan

Guiding Question: How do filmmakers bring history to life, and how does filmed history represent (or misrepresent) historical realities?

1. Begin by explaining that in this lesson students will examine a figure in women's history through the lens of filmmaking, producing a screenplay based on an autobiographical narrative and their own research into the time period in which that autobiography is set.

2. Introduce students to the filmmaking process with a visit to the Cinema exhibit at the Learner.Org website, accessible through EDSITEment. Here students can learn how the screenwriter, director, producer, actors, and editing team collaborate to create a finished film. Guide students through the exhibit or have them read through it on their own, focusing on the role played by the screenwriter and director. If time permits, students can also try their hand at writing a scene with an online activity.

3. Divide the class into small study teams of three or four students, and have each team choose one of the

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SEARCH EDSITEMENT

SUBJECT AREAS ▶

Literature: American

Literature: Biography

Art and Culture: Film

History: U.S.: Civil Rights

History: U.S.: Women's Rights

History: World: Human Rights

GRADE LEVELS ▶

9-12

TIME REQUIRED ▶

Four to six class periods

SKILLS ▶

- historical comprehension
- historical analysis and interpretation
- literary analysis and interpretation
- information gathering and research

autobiographical narratives listed below as the basis for their film script. (Note that these autobiographies range from full-length books (Fremont and Tubman) to chapter-length extracts.)

- Jessie Benton Fremont
  (http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/calbk:@field(DOCID+@lit(C188D0001)):)
  The wife of John C. Fremont, renowned explorer of the American West, describes her 1849 trip to California and life on the family's ranch east of San Francisco during the Gold Rush era in *A Year of American Travel* (1877), available through EDSITEment at the American Memory website.

- Harriet Tubman
  (http://metalab.unc.edu/docsouth/harriet/menu.html)
  This legendary figure in the struggle against slavery tells her life story in *Harriet, The Moses of Her People* (1886), a biography written by her friend Sarah H. Bradford, which is available through EDSITEment at the Documenting the American South website.

- Marie Haggerty
  At age 72, Haggerty recounts her experiences growing up on a New England farm in the late 19th century and her life as a domestic servant for wealthy Boston families in a seven-part oral history available through EDSITEment at the American Memory website. (Use the American Memory search engine with the keyword "Haggerty" to locate these documents.)

- Alice Hamilton
  (http://historymatters.gmu.edu/text/2097a-hamilton.html)
  A physician who worked with Jane Addams to improve working class conditions during the Progressive era, Hamilton recalls her efforts to expose the dangers of lead and other industrial poisons in a excerpt from her autobiography, *Exploring the Dangerous Trades* (1946), available through EDSITEment at the History Matters website.

- Katharin D. Morse
  (http://historymatters.gmu.edu/text/533i-Morse.html)
  A "canteen girl" during World War I, Morse describes how she brought comfort to American servicemen far from home with hot chocolate and movies in an excerpt from her memoir, *Uncensored Letters of a Canteen Girl* (1920), available through EDSITEment at the History Matters website.

4 As they read their selected narratives, have students gather preliminary details that they can use in their film scripts. For example: background information about the main character; identifying information about

- **critical thinking**
- **creative writing**
- **visual, auditory, and kinesthetic orientations**
- **development**
- **collaboration**
- **Internet skills**

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT ▸

Curriculum Standards for Social Studies

1. Culture (more)
2. Time, Continuity, and Change (more)
3. People, Places, and Environments (more)
4. Individual Development and Identity (more)

Standards for the English Language Arts

1. Students read a wide range of print and non print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world... (more)
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.(more)

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supporting characters; the period and setting for specific events; important or dramatic episodes in the story; lines of dialogue or quotations they might work into their script. In addition, encourage students who have selected a long narrative to choose a portion of the story that seems most suitable for film treatment.

5 After this preliminary reading, help students brainstorm a list of questions they can use to begin visualizing their narrative in film terms. The list should include questions that set a direction for historical research and questions that can be answered by close reading of the narrative itself. The framework below can provide a starting-point.

Visualizing the Scene

- What did it look like where these events took place?
- How did people live at that time? How did they dress? How did they furnish their homes? How did they travel?

Visualizing the Society

- What social attitudes were characteristic of those times (e.g., prejudices, assumptions about gender roles, class distinctions, etc.)?
- How were social relationships of the time similar to and different from relationships today (e.g., family relationships, sexual relationships, interracial relationships, economic or workplace relationships, etc.)?

Visualizing Character

- What did the characters look like? How old were they? What were their habits and manners?
- What are the characters' most distinctive personality traits? How do they interact with others? What do others say about them?

Visualizing Action

- What issues or values motivate the main character? What episodes test the character's motivation and commitment?
- What is the main character's goal at this point in her life? How is her life changed by the pursuit of this goal? What is her life like after this effort?

6 When they have prepared their lists of questions, have the student teams gather information for their screenplays. Divide this part of the lesson into three stages, providing ample class time and independent research time for each step in the research and preparation process.

A. Period Portfolios
Have students use library and Internet resources to create "Period Portfolios" that reflect the look and character of the time period in which their film will be set. These portfolios might include images of everyday life, important events, and famous individuals, as well as news reports, advertisements, and other primary documents. By creating their own portfolios, students should gain a feel for the period

3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. (more)
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.(more)
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts. (more)
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. (more)
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge. (more)
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles. (more)
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information). (more)

View your state's standards

that will help them visualize the settings and social milieu for their films. The EDSITEment websites listed below can provide a starting-point for this research.

- Jessie Benton Fremont
  California Gold Rush
  (http://www.museumca.org/goldrush.html)

  New Perspectives on THE WEST
  (http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/)

- Harriet Tubman
  Africans in America
  Part 4: Judgment Day 1831-1865
  (http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/narrative.html)

  American Memory
  The African-American Experience in Ohio, 1850-1920
  (http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award97/ohshtml/aaeohome.html)

- Marie Haggerty
  U. S. Women's History Workshop
  Teacher Workshop: Gender in the Mid-Nineteenth Century
  (http://www.assumption.edu/whw/workshop/untitled1.html)

- Alice Hamilton
  Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1830-1930
  Project on Illinois Factory Inspection, 1893-1897
  (http://womhist.binghamton.edu/factory/intro.htm)

- Katharin D. Morse
  The World War I Document Archive
  Photos of the Great War
  (http://raven.cc.ukans.edu/~kansite/ww_one/photos/greatwar.htm)

Students can also use NAIL (the NARA Archival Information Locator) at the Digital Classroom website to search the online holdings of the National Archives and the search engine at the American Memory website to search the online collections of the Library of Congress, as well as the EDSITEment search engine to search all EDSITEment websites.

B. Character Profiles
Have students prepare short profiles of the characters they will feature in their filmscripts, based on close reading of their narratives. These profiles can include physical description, personality traits, characteristic phrases and gestures, etc. Encourage students to imagine they are writing for the actors who will portray their characters as they prepare these profiles.

C. Story Elements
Finally, have students create an inventory of story elements for their filmscript by selecting and organizing episodes from their narrative. Encourage them to focus at this point on singling out the kernels of action amid the passages of reflection and commentary in the narrative, and on identifying dramatic events they can imagine translating into film scenes. Students should also look for episodes that test the motivation of their main character, and those in which she makes progress toward her goal.

7 Following this preparation, have students outline a plot for their movie, a process that will usually involve reshaping history somewhat to fit storytelling conventions. Remind students of the basic stages of plot development: conflict, complication, crisis, and resolution. Students may also find inspiration in some of the standard formulas Hollywood filmmakers use:

- Romance: A woman and man meet, feel a mutual attraction, encounter obstacles or lose one another, and finally get back together again.
- Quest: An individual or group work to achieve a goal, encountering obstacles, adventures, discouragement, and ultimately success.
- Conversion: An individual is changed, suddenly or over a period of time, by experiences, the influence of others, or the impact of events.
- Confrontation: An individual or group struggles to overcome, elude, or outsmart an adversary in order to survive.

8 Finally, have students script a key scene for their film, including scenic directions and dialogue. Remind students that images tell much of the story in a film, serving to evoke the emotions and thoughts of the viewer. To capture this visual element, students might talk through the scene with their teammates, describing what appears on screen, or they might close their eyes and try to see the action unfolding in their imaginations. Students should also strive to integrate their dialogue into the action of the scene. Rather than have characters deliver speeches, for example, let them talk while they are moving or doing something that will add visual interest to the scene.


Conclude this lesson by having each student team present its scripted scene to the class. Then lead a discussion reflecting on the process of translating history into film and the extent to which film conventions may influence our perceptions of the past. Based on their own screenwriting experience, for example, students may have a new insight into the way stereotypes implicitly shape film portrayals of women, ethnic groups, children, occupations, etc. They may also begin to recognize how the assumptions wrapped up in the term "Americana" help determine the kinds of stories we tell about America's past and the values we seek in our history. Use this discussion to explore the power of popularization in historical filmmaking and to foster more critical viewership.

Extending the Lesson

Continue your study of the relationship between storytelling conventions and our perception of historical and social realities by investigating traditions in children's literature. Visit the U.S. Women's History Workshop

website for an Electronic Classroom exhibit on Children's Literature that focuses on the way these stories reveal the moral assumptions of a society. Additional resources on children's literature are available in the "Childhood" area of the History of Education website, including World of the Child: Two Hundred Years of Children's Books at the University of Delaware, History of Children's Literature by Kay E. Vandergrift at Rutgers University, and Casting Characters: An Introduction to the History of Juvenile Literature to 1900 by Suzanne Semmes Dennis at Dartmouth College.

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